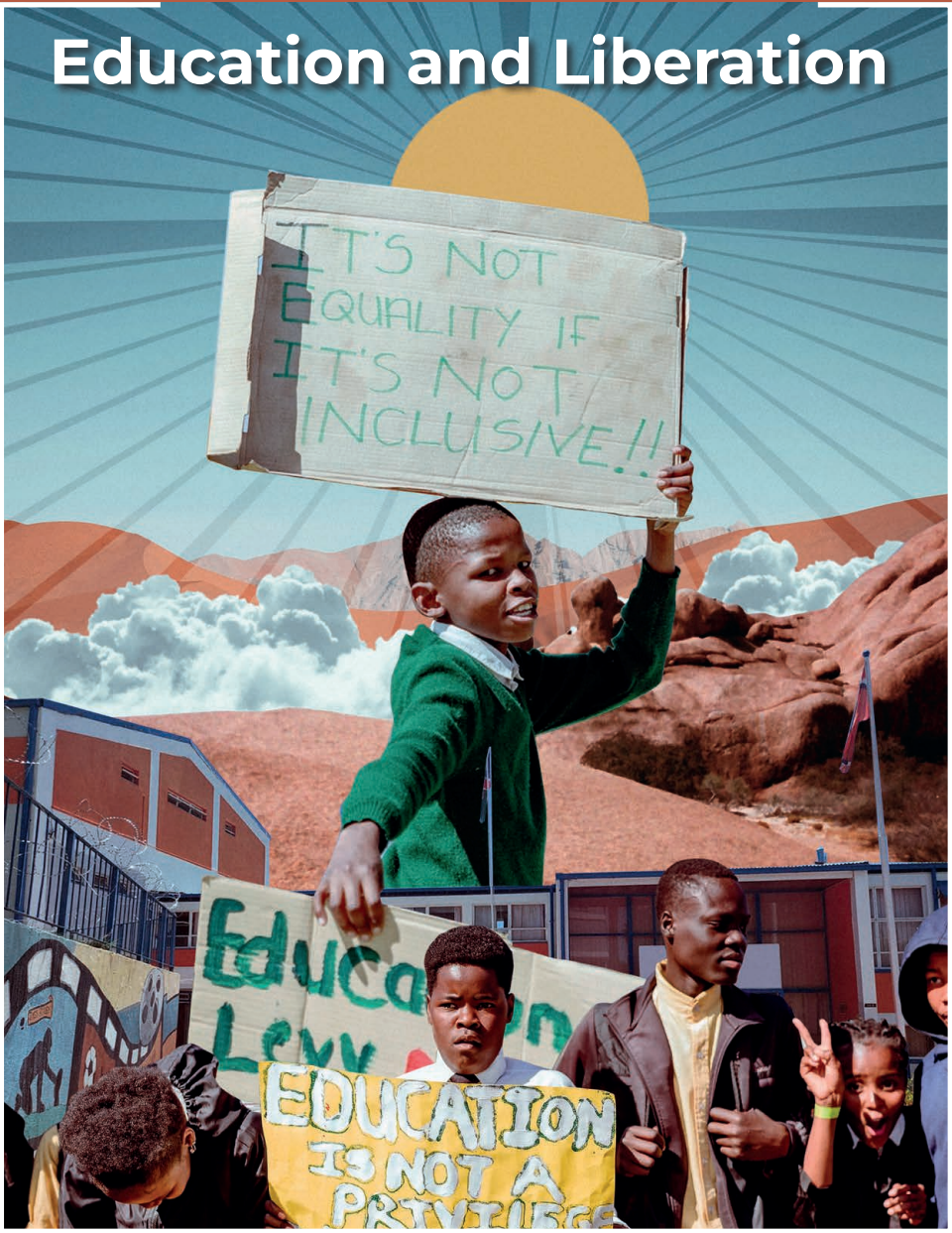
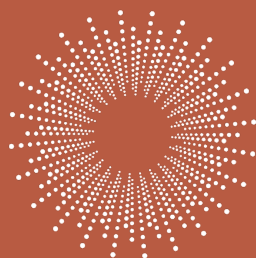




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Acronyms and Initialisms

ADHD	attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder
ECD	early childhood development
ELCIN	Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia
ELCRN	Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Republic of Namibia
ELP	English Literacy Project
EMIS	Education Management Information System
ESJT	Economic and Social Justice Trust
ETSIP	Education and Training Sector Improvement Plan
FAWENA	Forum for African Women Educationalists in Namibia
FOSATU	Federation of South African Trade Unions
GDP	gross domestic product
GEMRT	Global Education Monitoring Report Team
GRN	Government of the Republic of Namibia
ICH	intangible cultural heritage
IPC	Integrated Food Security Phase Classification
JMTC	Jakob Marengo Tutorial College
LACOM	Labour and Community Resources Project
LaRRI	Labour Resource and Research Institute
LCE	learner-centred education
MEAC	Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture
MEC	Ministry of Education and Culture
MoE	Ministry of Education
NABSO	Namibia Black Students Organisation
NANSO	Namibia National Students Organisation
NCBE	National Curriculum for Basic Education
NDP6	Sixth National Development Plan
NE	New Elementary
NIED	National Institute for Educational Development
NJSJ	Namibian Journal of Social Justice

NQA	Namibia Qualifications Authority
NSSCAS	Namibia Senior Secondary Certificate Advanced Subsidiary
NSSCH	Namibia Senior Secondary Certificate Higher
NSSCO	Namibia Senior Secondary Certificate Ordinary
NSSDSR	Namibia State of Skills Demand and Supply Report 2025
NUST	Namibia University of Science and Technology
OPC	Ovamboland People's Congress
PPSs	public-private partnerships
SACCAWU	South African Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers Union
SACHED	South African Committee for Higher Education
SASO	South African Students Organisation
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SPIE	Sector Policy on Inclusive Education
STEM	science, technology, engineering and mathematics
SYL	SWAPO Youth League
SWAPO	South West African People's Organisation
UCT	University of Cape Town
UN	United Nations
UNAM	University of Namibia
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNESCO IITE	UNESCO Institute for Information Technologies in Education
UNIA	Universal Negro Improvement Association
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
ULTS	United Lutheran Theological Seminary
UWC	University of the Western Cape
ZPD	zone of proximal development

Editorial: Education and Liberation

Lucy Edwards Jauch & Ndumba Kamwanyah

Introduction

The theme of “education and liberation” in Volume 5 of *Namibian Journal for Social Justice* is not only urgent and timely, but also historically grounded: it is a play on the aspirations voiced during the liberation struggle by a slogan of Namibia’s student movement, “education for liberation”.

Globally, and particularly in the Global South, education consistently functioned as a double-edged sword, being deployed as an instrument of colonial oppression, while simultaneously serving as a means of emancipation and resistance for the oppressed. Education offers a paradox: it can be a catalyst for liberation and serve as a transformative force for justice, dignity, and freedom, but it can also reproduce colonial hierarchies.

Social justice in education demands adherence to some key social justice principles, namely access, equity, participation, diversity, and respect for human rights. Namibia’s educational policy frameworks all declare deep commitment to these principles. However, many of the articles featured in this edition lay bare the gaps between policy discourse and practice

with the aims of stimulating discussion and engendering a review of current practices.

Across the globe, movements for decolonising education seek to challenge Eurocentric curricula, validate indigenous knowledge, and cultivate critical pedagogies (Smith, 2021). In this sense, education is becoming a praxis of liberation—an ongoing struggle to decolonise and transform oppressive structures and create spaces for dignity, justice, and freedom.

By weaving together case studies, theoretical reflections, and opinion pieces, this volume positions education as a transformative force. It calls on scholars, practitioners, communities and policymakers to recognise that education can oppress or liberate. Together, these contributions frame education in the context of power, identity, and justice, and not merely as the transmission of knowledge. This implies that liberation through education is lived experience in classrooms, communities, and historical memory.

Volume 5 also takes stock of how far Namibia has progressed in providing

quality education for all, and what challenges remain. The discussions cover all levels of education and skills development from early childhood development to tertiary education. The discussions also point to some of the structural factors beyond education per se that act as barriers severely curtailing access to equitable, quality education for all. A key question that emerges is whether, in a highly unequal society, it is possible to provide equitable quality education to all.

Education for Liberation: An Overview

Liberation can be defined as an emancipatory project and the actions taken to free individuals or groups from control by and dependence on external entities. Such control and dependence can manifest as restraint, confinement, restriction, repression, slavery, or domination. Liberation can occur through the passive attainment of legal rights or active and deliberative acts towards self-empowerment (Susen, 2015). Various educational philosophers, particularly those confronted with conditions of repression, applied these emancipatory ideals to education. The most notable is the Brazilian educational philosopher Paulo Freire, who operated under conditions of military dictatorship and saw education as a means for personal empowerment and societal transformation (Freire, 1970/2007).

Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* remains a consistent authority in understanding education as a political act for the oppressed and a pathway to liberation. From this standpoint, Freire (1970/2007) argues that education must move beyond what he calls the "banking model" of depositing information into passive learners. Instead, education should liberate and foster "*conscientização*"—critical consciousness that enables individuals to challenge oppressive systems. This critical pedagogic framework is particularly relevant in postcolonial and neoliberal contexts where education systems continue to bear the imprint of colonial and capitalist epistemologies that undermine democratic schooling (Giroux, 2011).

In Africa, Julius Nyerere's education and liberation philosophy combined the emancipatory ideals of education for liberation with utilitarianism to address the legacies of colonialism facing newly independent African states. For Nyerere, education should be a platform for the transition from socioeconomic dependency to economic independence and self-reliance. As such, education should facilitate the acquisition of problem-solving and critical-thinking skills, a community-oriented ethos, vocational skills, and practical skills to address the problems of underdevelopment caused by colonialism (Okanda, 2024).

During the liberation struggle in South Africa, education was an important site of resistance, and educational boycotts were common ways of registering dissent with the apartheid system. In some quarters, the slogan “liberation before education” emerged. Neville Alexander (1990) explored the paradoxical relationship between education and liberation. On the one hand, education is a means through which the system of racial capitalism reproduced itself, while on the other, students needed the skills education offered for their own social reproduction/ survival within the existing social order. He therefore opposed suicidal tactics that would sacrifice the education of an entire generation for political ends. Instead, he argued that education could be transformed into a weapon to build critical consciousness that could be used to challenge the oppressive system. He proposed an alternative education that draws on Freire’s visions and critical pedagogy methods.

Education for Liberation in Namibia: Historical Context

Namibia has a long history of student involvement in emancipatory politics. Educational issues and the student movement had catalytic effects on the broader anticolonial and national liberation struggle. As far back as 1921, the Universal Negro Improvement

Association (UNIA), a Pan-African cultural organisation founded by Marcus Garvey, with the rallying slogan “Africa for Africans” raised awareness about colonialism, aiming to reclaim and free the homeland from white domination. The UNIA operated in the central and southern parts of Namibia. In 1923, the Otjiserandu (Red Band Organisation) organised mainly among Ovaherero groups to build a mutual aid society that protested the lack of educational opportunities.

In opposition to apartheid education in 1948, Nama leaders from the African Methodist Episcopal Church commenced with the formation of independent schools. The African Improvement Society, a Namibian offshoot of UNIA, also concerned itself with educational and cultural opportunities for indigenous Africans. During the 1940s, the Damara community of Windhoek formed Fakkell (Torch), an organisation that also protested poor educational opportunities and forced removals (Katjavivi, 1988).

In 1952, the South West Africa Student Body was formed by Namibian students in South Africa. They petitioned the UN regarding the continued South African control over Namibia. In 1957, Namibian students in South Africa joined forces with Namibian migrant workers in South Africa to form the Ovamboland

People's Congress (OPC) in Cape Town (Becker, 2017; Leys & Saul, 1995). Key figures in the OPC were Andimba Herman Toivo Ya Toivo, Emil Appolus, Fanuel Kozonguizi, Andreas Shipanga, Maxton Joseph Mutonguleme, Jacob Kuhangua, Solomon Mifima, Otilie Schimming Abrahams, and Kenneth Abrahams. The OPC's aim was to fight for the rights of migrant workers (South African History Online, 2013). In 1958, the short-lived South West Africa Progressive Association was formed. Although it collapsed a year later, it laid the foundation for the formation of the South West African National Union (SWANU), a Namibian resistance movement (Maseko, 1995).

During the 1970s, under the auspice of the SWAPO Youth League (SYL) and the Namibian Black Students Organisation (NABSO), students raised political consciousness across the country. SYL organised across ethnic divides and supported the major workers' strike of 1971. In 1972, students aligned to SYL supported a boycott of Ovamboland elections (Leys & Saul, 1995). In 1972 a Christian students conference in Okahandja resolved to set up a new student movement that straddled ethnic divides. This led to the eventual formation of NABSO in 1975. In 1975, NABSO rejected the Turnhalle Conference as a racist South African hoax. They linked workers' and students' struggles to the broader

national liberation struggle. With the 1976 student uprisings in South Africa, NABSO organised a school boycott against the use of Afrikaans in schools. Schools across the country took part in the boycott (Maseko, 1995; Williams, 2004; Leys & Saul, 1995).

In 1982 Namibian students at the University of Fort Hare in South Africa mooted the idea of a new Namibian student movement. The Namibian National Students Organisation (NANSO) was launched at Döbra in 1984 as a non-racial, non-partisan, unaffiliated and independent student movement. NANSO linked educational struggles to the broader national liberation struggle, and embraced Freirian philosophy (hence its slogan "education for liberation") (Leys & Saul, 1995). In his case study "The Quest for Education for Liberation: The Case of the Namibia National Students Organisation", Ndumba Kamwanyah illustrates how NANSO represented a strand of the broader liberation movement. NANSO was formed in 1984 to primarily oppose Bantu Education. However, its political programme demonstrated a commitment to resisting apartheid and colonial occupation. This came on the heels of the implementation of AG8 (Administrator General's Proclamation 8) of 1980 that incorporated education into the broader Bantustan policy of racial and ethnic fragmentation (Cohen, 1994).

It also came at the time when many young Namibians were forcibly conscripted into the South West African Territorial Force (an auxiliary arm of the occupying South African Defence Force) which was set up to oppose the People's Liberation Army of Namibia (Nöthling, 1989).

Artists were central to building critical consciousness and resistance to colonialism and apartheid in Namibia. In his article "Critical Pedagogies in Anti-Colonial Cultural Work: Oudano as Praxis", Nashilongwe-shipwe Mushaandja explores the nexus between the arts and critical pedagogy. He specifically looks at cultural processes as transformative education. His archival research features art works of influential Namibian artists like John Muafangejo. Through the art works, he interprets the agency of anticolonial resistance for decolonial thinking.

There were strong linkages between the Namibian and South African liberation movements. Due to a lack of tertiary educational opportunities in occupied Namibia, many had to pursue tertiary studies in South Africa, where they joined resistance politics. In "A Case Study of Radical Pedagogy in Practice: The South African Committee for Higher Education (SACHED) and Regional Liberation Networks (1959–1994)", Tammy-Lee Lakay illustrates how education for liberation was part

of the liberation discourse, and how the South African Committee for Higher Education (SACHED) gave concrete expression to the concept of education for liberation through praxis, featuring the programmes through which it implemented its critical pedagogy and the participation of Namibian students in some of them.

Education for All in Namibia: Staking Stock

"Education is a right, not a privilege" was a slogan of the student movement during the liberation struggle. Since then, Namibia has established the legal right to education. This was based on various international human rights instruments, most notably Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which declares that everyone has the right to free and compulsory basic education (United Nations, 2015). Article 20 of the Namibian Constitution affirms this right to education for all, as well as free, compulsory education up to the age of 16 (Government of the Republic of Namibia [GRN], 2016). This right is further consolidated by the Basic Education Act of 2020 (GRN, 2020).

There is a need to take stock of how far education has lived up to the emancipatory ideals of Namibia's independence struggle, and what challenges still confront education in the country. At independence, Namibia

was faced with a fragmented, racist and unequal educational system. This was the legacy of German colonial racism, and South African colonial racism and apartheid. Overcoming this legacy has proven to be a monumental task—indeed, one that has not yet been fully achieved. The question arises: Can there be equitable access to education in the structural context of extreme levels of poverty and inequality? Despite the introduction of numerous laws and policies to increase equitable access to education and relatively high budgetary allocations to education, as well as the introduction of free, compulsory basic education, access to quality education remains unequal and, for many, elusive. The colonial-apartheid deficits continue to impact educational achievement. Massification in access has overstretched resources, schools are overcrowded, and there are teacher shortages and a lack of basic services and learning materials; education, though inadequate, may itself be free, but many cannot afford the indirect costs of education like transport and uniforms (Shikoha et al., 2023).

In this volume of *Namibian Journal for Social Justice*, two articles explain the current challenges facing education in Namibia. In their article, “Challenges that Outsmart the Transformation Agenda: An Analysis of Why Certain Challenges Persist in the Namibian Education System Despite Several Reforms”,

John Nyambe, Marius Kudumo and Ellison Tjirera investigate the causal factors that impede educational transformation in Namibia, identifying three levels of such factors. They argue that ontologically, the neoliberal agenda is the underpinning causal force in the lack of transformation. This ontological force is often ignored, and impediments are often analysed at the surface or empirical level. There is therefore a need to increase the depth of perspective beyond surface level observations in order to come to terms with the challenges that outsmart educational reform in Namibia.

In her article “Social Justice and Education in Namibia: From Theory to Practice”, Lucy Edwards-Jauch looks at how social justice in education has manifested in Namibia. She addresses the theoretical and global policy discourses that influenced Namibian educational policy discourse and implementation. She further identifies the conditions and principles from which social justice in Namibian education can be assessed, namely redistributive justice, relational justice, and epistemological justice. She assesses these conditions through the key social justice principles of access, equity, participation, diversity, and human rights, and concludes that there is a gap between Namibia’s policy discourse, which embraces social justice, and how these policies are translated into practice.

In a case titled “Education for All? Unpacking Social Justice and Grassroots Policy Implementation: A Case Study of the Otjituuo Settlement”, Tjipura Tjipura points out that free and compulsory basic education that ensures equitable, inclusive, quality lifelong learning, as mandated by the Basic Education Act (3 of 2020), is not being realised. His study reveals deep-seated systemic barriers that challenge the essence of social justice, particularly epistemological justice, including pedagogical silencing and the enforcement of the academic hierarchy. It is claimed that lower-performing students do not have the right to speak, and are subject to systemic resource depletion with severe shortages of textbooks, the absence of information and communication technology, and deteriorating infrastructure.

Epistemic Justice: Colonial Legacies and Decolonising Education

Colonialism often led to the erasure of indigenous knowledge and cultural systems, and has also left enduring epistemological legacies. Universities and other educational institutions remain sites of epistemological violence where indigenous African knowledge is marginalised as inferior, and epistemic diversity of African knowledge systems remain suppressed. With the emergence of decoloniality debates, there have been louder calls for epistemic justice

in curriculum development to validate indigenous African knowledge systems (Woldegiorgis, 2025).

In Namibia, the colonial legacy of education is evident in the privileging of Eurocentric knowledge systems and the marginalisation of indigenous epistemologies (Matemba & Lilemba, 2015; Zulu & Lumadi, 2025). Therefore, education in independent Namibia (both public and private) stands in stark juxtaposition to Neville Alexander’s contention that education for a new humanism ought to dismantle hegemonic structures and affirm the dignity of marginalised communities (Alexander, 2001). Against this background, this volume responds to that call to disrupt colonial and neoliberal pedagogies in Namibia and elsewhere. By doing so, this volume is situating education as a central battleground in the struggle for justice, human dignity, and liberation.

Articulating the theme of this volume, the articles in this issue offer concrete illustrations of the ways in which education intersects with liberation. In “Beyond Colonialities: Leveraging Ubuntu for Transformative Higher Education in Namibia”, the authors Bruno Venditto and Adalbertus Kamanzi propose the Ubuntu philosophy, with its emphasis on relationality and communal values, to serve as a counter-hegemonic framework in higher education. As Letseka (2011) contends,

Ubuntu challenges the individualism and competitiveness embedded in colonial and neoliberal models of education, and in their stead offers a vision of education rooted in solidarity and collective flourishing.

In their contribution “Epistemic Destruction and Indigenous Knowledge Loss During the OvaHerero/Nama Genocide (1904–1908): A Case study of OvaHerero Epistemicide”, Kahuhu Alphons Koruhama and Joyce Muzengua examine the systematic erasure of indigenous knowledge by colonial violence. This contribution underscores the historical trauma that continues to shape educational institutions in Namibia and other societies that have experienced colonial violence. Therefore, the article answers Gewald’s calls to urgently reclaim indigenous epistemologies as part of the broader project of liberation (Gewald, 1999).

Fares Amweenye, Sakaria Ipinge and Elizabeth Ngololo’s article, “Epistemological Access at the Institutions of Teacher Education” focuses on structural barriers within institutions of teacher education. The authors pose a critical question about whose knowledge is legitimised, and who gains access to epistemological resources. From this standpoint, epistemological access is not simply about physical entry into institutions, but about meaningful engagement

with knowledge that affirms learners’ identities and contexts (Morrow, 2009).

There is a misalignment between expenditure on tertiary education and early childhood development (ECD). A lack of school readiness accounts for high rates of repetition (United Nations Children’s Fund, 2024). This is illustrated by significant learning poverty (Steenkamp, 2025). ECD access is crucial for cognitive development and equity as it provides the basis for epistemological access. In a case study, “Decolonising Early Childhood Development in Informal Settlements: A Case Study of New Elementary Namibia and the Implementation of the Sixth National Development Plan”, Kevin Wessels illustrates how community-based ECD centres in informal settlements try to plug the gaps in state-funded provision. New Elementary Namibia offers decolonised learning that confers dignity and recognises indigenous knowledge. Despite this, learners face multiple resource constraints, including overcrowded classrooms, underqualified teachers, limited stipends, food insecurity, and inadequate infrastructure.

With reference to theological education, Emma Nangolo’s article “The Relevance of Theological Education in Contemporary Namibia: A Contextual Analysis of the United Lutheran Theological Seminary–Paulinum” points

to the continued epistemological dominance of Western philosophical and knowledge systems in theological education in Namibia. Her case study of the United Lutheran Theological Seminary – Paulinum's Bachelor and Diploma programmes identifies the gaps in the curriculum that, if filled, would make it relevant to the Namibian historical, social and theological context. She demonstrates that due to the lack of a decolonised curriculum, the theological educational programme overlooks key social justice issues facing Namibian society, including gender dynamics, poverty and unemployment, and the need for land reform and LGBTQ inclusion. She further argues that Namibia requires a theological education that builds theological depth, spirituality, contextual understanding and pastoral competence.

Access, Diversity and Inclusion

Namibia has adopted “education for all” and policies on inclusive education affirm Namibia's commitment to access for all, inclusion, and diversity (GRN, 1992, 2013). The translation of policy discourse into practice has been a challenge, as several articles in this volume illustrate. In their article “A Case Study of Parenting a Neurodivergent Child Juxtaposed Against the Provisions of the Sector Policy on Inclusive Education in Namibia”, Immaculate Mogotsi

and Christel Menette critically reflect on persistent gaps between policy commitments and the lived realities of educational access for neurodivergent learners. Their autoethnographic case study explores the difficulties of meaningful access to education from the perspective of a parent of a neurodivergent child. They point to institutional weaknesses that fail neurodivergent children, and call for systemic reform, collaborative practice, and the deliberate translation of inclusive education policies into classroom-level action.

Namibia has achieved success in ensuring access to education for the girl child, with high female enrolment rates in primary, secondary and tertiary education. There is generally equal enrolment of males and females in all school grades (GRN, 2025), while females constitute 64.7% of enrolment at tertiary education institutions (Namibia Council for Higher Education [NCHE], 2023). Phiona Nandu's case study “Bridging the Gender Gap in Education in Zambezi Region, Namibia” illustrates how, despite these statistics, very specific gender issues, like learner pregnancies and menstruation, affect female education. She also points out how the lack of facilities and resources compound barriers to education for girls.

Access to higher education has increased substantially, and between

2019 and 2023 enrolment at Namibian tertiary institutions jumped from 13,000 to 80,226 (NCHE, 2023). With the recent introduction of subsidised higher education, one can assume that this massification will continue, and with it bring about an improvement in Namibia's skills base. In his opinion piece "Dissecting the Subsidised Funding Model in Namibia 2026: Free Registration and the Question of Sustainable Access to Higher Education", Benhard Kavau embraces subsidised fee-free higher education, but also asks what will happen to additional costs associated with higher education.

Adult and Non-Formal Education

Besides the traditional literacy and vocational training for income generation, there are additional social justice dimensions to adult education. Beyond the capabilities to sustain livelihoods, adult education should also promote active citizenship and enable the assertion of rights (Milana & Tarozzi, 2021). In this volume, we have two short case studies of adult education programmes that attempt to deepen democracy, advance active citizenship, and enhance knowledge and skills for the assertion of rights.

In his case study "Political Worker Education in Namibia: The Case of the Labour Diploma Course", Herbert

Jauch reflects on the Namibia National Union of Namibian Workers-linked worker education programme run by the Labour Resource and Research Institute (LaRRI). The focus of this programme was to build the internal capacity of trade unions to engage with organisational and broader policy challenges. LaRRI's labour diploma course targeted trade unionists to enhance their capacity to improve organisational development and their participation in policy discourse.

In the promotion of social justice, there is a need for education on the basic principles and dimensions of social justice. In an article that focuses social justice education for social justice activists, Herbert Jauch and Nafimane Hamukoshi, in "Contributing towards Social Justice in Namibia? The Activist School of the Economic and Social Justice Trust", explain the purpose, curriculum content and results of the Economic and Social Justice Trust's activist school. It provides insights into the wide spectrum of social justice concerns confronting Namibia and the world, like inequality, unemployment and poverty; decent housing and human rights; the struggle for a living wage; climate justice, the ecological crisis; the political economy; and social protection and gender justice. Their study reaffirms the importance of capacity-building for activism for social justice.

Research Review: Namibia State of Skills Demand and Supply Report

Educational attainment and outcomes are influenced by a number of structural and systemic challenges outside of the classroom. Christophina Ainima's article "Review of the Namibia State of Skills Demand and Supply Report" reveals some misalignments in the 2025 report that was commissioned by the Namibia Investment Promotion Development Board. The Namibian labour force faces some critical challenges. Firstly, there are high unemployment rates combined with critical skills shortages in key productive and technology-intensive sectors. Secondly, there is very little curriculum coordination between industry and educational institutions. Thirdly, the quality of education is often poor, with low educational attainment at secondary school level which precludes entry into some key fields of study. Beyond the systemic imbalances, the review points to broader, often unacknowledged structural factors that impact skills development. These include unequal access to cultural and financial resources that enable completion of resource intensive study pathways beyond formal enrolment. The skills deficit thesis is often invoked to explain high unemployment in Namibia, but the review also points to the structural nature of unemployment and the limited labour market absorption capacity.

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The Quest for Education for Liberation: The Case of the Namibia National Students Organisation

Ndumba J. Kamwanyah

Abstract:

In this case study, I explore the foundational role played by the Namibia National Students Organisation (NANSO) in advancing education as a site of political struggle and social transformation during the national liberation struggle. Founded in 1984 amidst the repressive colonial and apartheid regime of South Africa in Namibia, NANSO's history is a testament to the interconnectedness of education, political consciousness, and collective action.

Drawing from archival records, liberation-era documents, and my own positionality in the student movement, this case study analyses NANSO's political programme, organisational structures and campaigns, and the repression it endured at the hands of the apartheid state. From that perspective, the case study situates NANSO within the broader discourse of Education for Liberation, arguing that its legacy remains relevant in contemporary debates on equitable and decolonised education in Namibia.



The NANSO Cassinga Day march of 4 May 1988 brought thousands of students into the streets and showed that students were no longer willing to accept colonial oppression. Source: John Liebenberg

Introduction

Globally, education has been both a site of oppression and a practice of freedom—one that equips students (and teachers) not only with analytical and methodological skills, but also with the critical consciousness necessary to understand, challenge, and transform unequal social, political, and economic structures. In Namibia's colonial and apartheid history, education was weaponised to reinforce racial segregation and social inequality under the mantra of Bantu Education. In this context, NANSO emerged in 1984 as a pivotal force in student mobilisation and resistance. The organisation's formation and subsequent activism reflect the conception of Paulo Freire (1970/2007) of education for liberation, which emphasises the development of critical consciousness and the mobilisation of oppressed communities for social change. He called it the pedagogy of the oppressed.

Historical background:

The formation of NANSO

Founded on 2 June 1984 at Döbra, NANSO arose in response to the fragmented and racially segregated education system imposed by apartheid. Students across Namibia were subjected to Bantu Education which was characterised by inferior curricula, overcrowded classrooms, and racial discrimination. NANSO

provided a unified platform that cut across regional and institutional boundaries, offering students a national voice in fighting for student interests in the broader anti-colonial resistance.

The formation of NANSO was fundamentally a response to colonial domination, oppression and apartheid education policies that systematically excluded most of the Namibian youth from access to universal, quality education. The colonial education system entrenched inequalities by discriminating on the basis of race, ethnicity, and gender, thereby intentionally limiting educational opportunities for Black and Coloured Namibians while privileging a minority. Many students were denied access to schools, adequate resources, and post-secondary education, reinforcing cycles of social and economic marginalisation. In confronting these injustices, NANSO organised under the slogan “education is a right, not a privilege”, articulating a clear demand for free, inclusive, and equitable education as a central component of national liberation and social justice.

The organisation was influenced by the earlier ideologies of liberation movements like the South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO) and regional counterparts such as the South African Students Organisation (SASO). However, NANSO maintained an

autonomous stance while supporting the broader liberation goals of SWAPO.

Political Programme and Activities

NANSO's political programme was grounded in democratic ideals, anti-colonialism, and student empowerment. It viewed education as a transformative force for development and social progress, rather than as a privilege. As attested by NANSO internal documents from 1984–1990, central to the organisation's agenda at that time were demands for:

- free and compulsory education for all Namibians;
- the dismantling of the racially segregated school system;
- the right to student representation in school governance;
- the removal of colonial curricula and the implementation of Afrocentric education;
- an end to military conscription of youth; and
- the removal of military bases from school premises.

As Amukugo (1995) argues, Namibia's liberal democratic framework after independence has often prioritised equality of opportunity over structural social justice. NANSO's earlier activism challenged such limitations by insisting on education as a

human right and public good tied to national liberation.

Organisational structure and leadership

NANSO operated within a decentralised framework that brought together school-level groups, regional formations, and a central national leadership, in a federalised approach. This organisational arrangement enabled broad-based student involvement and ensured that local concerns could be effectively addressed. The organisation's leadership was chosen through democratic processes, with positions such as president, secretary-general, and regional organisers playing a central role in guiding its activities and strategic vision. In addition, specialised committees dedicated to political education, international solidarity, and gender equity were crucial in cultivating NANSO's internal political ethos. Notably, many former members of the organisation went on to assume prominent positions in government and civil society following independence.

Tertiary education students, both within South African universities and at the then Academy in Namibia, played a particularly significant role within NANSO, and frequently constituted its core leadership. Exposure to broader political debates, liberation movements, and international soli-

darity networks at these institutions helped to sharpen their organisational and ideological capacities. Students studying in South Africa often acted as important conduits for ideas, strategies, and external support, while those at the Academy provided a local intellectual and organisational base for mobilisation inside Namibia. As a result, many of the democratically elected leaders who occupied key positions within NANSO—including roles on the national executive structure—were drawn from the ranks of tertiary students, reinforcing the organisation's strong emphasis on political education, disciplined leadership, and long-term movement building.

At the same time, secondary school students were crucial to NANSO's vitality at the grassroots level, anchoring the organisation's school-based committees and regional structures, where they mobilised peers, articulated local grievances, and ensured a steady pipeline of activists into the broader student movement.

Campaigns and mobilisation strategies

Throughout the 1980s, NANSO spearheaded several high-impact campaigns that exposed the failures and injustices of colonialism and apartheid education. These included:

- the 1988 country-wide School Boycott, which involved mass student protests and refusals to attend school in response to curriculum and administrative grievances, as well as the demand for demilitarisation of education. The 1988 country-wide School Boycott was further marked by mass class boycotts and widespread arrests, particularly in opposition to the continued use of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction, underscoring both the depth of student resistance and the coercive response of the authorities;
- the Anti-Conscription Campaign, which challenged the forced conscription of Namibian youth into the South African military and the South West Africa Territorial Force; and
- the 1989 Voter Education and Election Campaign, which prepared young people to participate in Namibia's anticipated first democratic elections, which brought about independence.

These actions employed non-violent resistance strategies, including marches, hunger strikes, underground mobilisation and publications, and collaboration with workers' unions, churches and international solidarity

movements. Despite harsh responses from the colonial state, these campaigns contributed significantly to the broader liberation struggle and international pressure on the apartheid regime.

Repression and state surveillance

As a student-led organisation advocating for systemic change, NANSO faced persistent repression by the apartheid security apparatus. The South West Africa Police, the South West Africa Territorial Force, and the South African Defence Force frequently disrupted meetings, arrested leaders, and infiltrated student networks.

Detentions without trial, torture, and school closures were common tactics used to suppress dissent (Amukugo, 1995). Despite this, NANSO adapted by operating semi-clandestinely and aligning itself with supportive churches, trade unions, and non-governmental organisations.

Institutions that shaped and nurtured NANSO activism

Beyond NANSO's own organisational efforts, a plethora of institutions played a decisive role in shaping its critical consciousness, linking education to political struggle. Martin Luther High School and Döbra High School, along

with other schools in the country, served as intellectual incubators where students encountered ideas of resistance and self-determination. On the other hand, church institutions, especially through the Council of Churches in Namibia, provided moral legitimacy and organisational support, framing education as both a spiritual and a liberatory mission. Similarly, trade unions such as the Mine Workers Union of Namibia, the Metal and Allied Namibian Workers Union, the Namibia Food and Allied Workers Union and the Namibia Public Workers Union mobilised workers and students around shared grievances, reinforcing the notion that education was inseparable from the broader struggle for justice. In addition, liberation movements, particularly SWAPO, emphasised the transformative potential of education as a weapon against colonial domination, nurturing a generation of activists who viewed classrooms as sites of resistance.

Together, these institutions created a network of solidarity that empowered NANSO to position education not merely as a technical skill but as a vehicle for social transformation and national liberation. In this way, these institutions collectively laid the groundwork for NANSO's emergence, embedding education within the broader struggle for liberation and social transformation.

Legacy and contemporary relevance

Since Namibia's independence in 1990, NANSO has continued to exist, though its role has shifted. While some critics have argued that it has become more aligned with ruling party politics, NANSO remains active in advocating for affordable education and student rights.

It is perhaps worth mentioning that NANSO's engagements have been depoliticised, particularly in comparison to the overtly radical stance that characterised NANSO's early years. Nevertheless, recent debates on university tuition fees, student debt, and the quality of public education in independent Namibia echo the organisation's foundational activism and mission. According to Shikalepo (2019), current education policy often fails to account for the structural inequalities rooted in colonialism and apartheid. NANSO's historical commitment to Education for Liberation therefore continues to offer a framework for reimagining Namibian education beyond mere access, towards genuine equity and transformation.

Conclusion

NANSO's history reflects the critical role that student activism can play in resisting oppression and advancing the cause of education as a fundamental human right. The organisation's ideological foundation, grassroots mobilisation, and resistance to repression position it firmly within the global tradition of education for liberation. In revisiting NANSO's past, current and future activists can find inspiration and guidance for building a just, decolonised, and inclusive education system in Namibia.

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A Case Study of Radical Pedagogy in Practice: The South African Committee for Higher Education (SACHED) and Regional Liberation Networks (1959–1994)

Tammy-Lee Lakay

Abstract:

This case study illustrates how the South African Committee for Higher Education (SACHED), which was the largest and most prolific anti-apartheid educational organisation, implemented critical pedagogy through its Bursary Project, Khanya College, the magazine Upbeat, and the Labour and Community Resources Project (LACOM). These interventions reflected their ethos: expanding access to quality education and advancing education as a tool for liberation. Notably, the 1980s marked a distinct shift in SACHED's approach from liberal interventionist models toward more radical, labour, and politically engaged educational practices. It also reflects the key principles of critical pedagogy, namely: the creation of critical consciousness in order to facilitate action towards transforming oppressive conditions; humane pedagogy; and pedagogy as a democratic process of dialogue. The article also reflects on SACHED's internationalism that created opportunities for participation across national boundaries, particularly as it shines a light on the lesser-known

connection between SACHED and Namibia. A combination of archival research, secondary sources and interviews established how SACHED's democratic, non-racial and non-sectarian ethos fostered Critical Consciousness through its projects and collaborations.

Historical Background

SACHED emerged as a response to the Extension of University Education Act (45 of 1959). This act explicitly barred South African students classified as Black, Coloured and Indian under apartheid race-based laws from entering historically white institutions. Furthermore, the Act prompted a massive re-organisation of the higher education landscape in South Africa, which made it more difficult for blacks to study at the historically 'open' institutions, where they were only ever a small minority. It also provided the basis for the establishment of new universities for specific 'racial' and 'ethnic' groups. SACHED was formally founded in Johannesburg in November

of 1959 with the intention of providing democratic, non-sectarian, non-racial education for those excluded under the illegitimate laws of the apartheid regime (Solomon, 1994). The committee was initiated by a group of academics, learners, church people and others who committed themselves to struggle against the effects of these laws in as practical a way as possible, through attempting to provide access to tertiary education for young black people outside the apartheid framework, but to ensure survival, within the law (Nonyongo, 1998, p. 154).

SACHED's history is intertwined with that of the liberation struggle, and its shifts influenced the changes in SACHED, which evolved through the development of its various projects. These projects not only reflect key moments in the organisation, but also provide insight into the broader politics of the anti-apartheid struggle.

Methodology

This research draws on archival materials housed in the South African Committee for Higher Education (SACHED) collections at the University of the Witwatersrand's Historical Papers Research Archive and the Mayibuye Centre housed at the University of the Western Cape (UWC). In addition, the production of oral histories through the SACHED Archiving Project (SAP) formed a central component of the

data collection process. The project was established to address silences surrounding SACHED and its various projects by gathering documents, testimonies, and audio-visual material from former staff and students. The project has catalogued, indexed, and digitised substantial portions of SACHED's archival records, making these materials publicly accessible through its website and associated digital platforms. Liberation archives, while grounded in struggle, remain vulnerable to processes of depoliticisation or institutional domestication, particularly through digitisation and reclassification. Accordingly, this study reads the archive "against the grain," situating documents within their political contexts and foregrounding activism as integral to archival practice rather than external to it (Stoler, 2009).

Furthermore, oral history interviews conducted between 2023 and 2025 complement the archival material. These interviews included former SACHED staff members and collaborators from different phases of the organisation's development. Interviews explored participants' political trajectories, their involvement in SACHED, and their reflections on institutional change over time. This article draws particularly on interviews with Lindy Wilson (SACHED Cape Town Director), John Samuel (SACHED National Director), Ciraj Rassool (Khanya

College lecturer), and Ronny Dempers (Namibian student at Khanya College). The selection reflects the temporal and ideological shifts within SACHED and supports the article's central argument: that the organisation's radical turn was historically produced rather than inevitable.

Finally, the study engages the limited but important secondary literature on SACHED, particularly the MA theses of Marcus Solomon and Gareth Coleman. Both authors wrote from positions closely connected to SACHED and LACOM, offering insight into internal debates, political shifts, and institutional transformations. Their work provides an important historiographical foundation for situating this article within existing scholarship while extending it through new archival and oral sources.

SACHED's Educational Philosophy

SACHED integrated different manifestations of critical pedagogy. These comprised the Black Consciousness Movement's People's Education and Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970/2000). Central to Freire's philosophy is the concept of conscientisation, which is the development of critical consciousness through which individuals recognise structural oppression, and their capacity to transform it. Education, in this framework, becomes a process of political awakening rather than mere

credential acquisition. In the South African context, it must also be understood as emerging from indigenous traditions of Black Consciousness, popular education, and anti-apartheid struggle. Organisations such as SACHED translated these theoretical commitments into concrete educational practices under conditions of political repression.

The theoretical framework outlined above provides a lens through which to interpret SACHED's transformation in the late 1970s and 1980s. The following section demonstrates how these philosophical principles materialised in specific institutional shifts, curricular interventions, and regional solidarities.

The banking model and dialogical education

Paulo Freire's critique of the "banking model" of education remains foundational to radical pedagogy. In this model, education functions as a process of deposit-making: the teacher occupies a position of authority, while students are treated as passive containers into which knowledge is placed. Such a system reproduces hierarchy, discourages critical thought, and ultimately stabilises oppressive social orders. Freire proposes instead a dialogical model of education, grounded in mutual inquiry, critical reflection, and the co-production of knowledge (Freire, 2000/1970).

SACHED's pedagogical evolution reflects a movement away from conventional "chalk and talk" instruction toward dialogical engagement. As Lindy Wilson noted in an interview, tutors working with problematic University of South Africa (UNISA) materials in the 1960s and 1970s did not treat prescribed texts as neutral or authoritative. Instead, tutors encouraged students to interrogate the content, question ideological assumptions, and situate knowledge within lived experience. This pedagogical stance marked an important departure from passive exam preparation and signalled a broader commitment to critical engagement.

Conscientisation and political literacy

In the post-1976 conjuncture, education in South Africa increasingly became understood as a primary terrain of struggle. SACHED's later projects reflect this shift. Khanya College and LACOM were designed not simply to expand access to qualifications, but to cultivate political literacy among workers, students, and community members. Oral histories from former students such as Ronny Dempers, alongside testimonies from Khanya lecturers, underscore how classroom debates were intertwined with contemporary political realities.

Through discussion-based learning and critical engagement with history and labour politics, these institutions fostered an awareness of structural inequality. In this sense, SACHED's pedagogical turn aligned closely with Freire's conception of conscientisation: education as the development of critical awareness necessary for collective transformation.

Praxis: Education embedded in struggle

For Freire, praxis represents the inseparable unity of reflection and action. Education must not remain at the level of theory; it must be embedded in concrete struggle. SACHED's alignment with labour movements in the 1980s illustrates this dimension of praxis. Projects connected to trade unions, including collaborations with COSATU and women in the garment industry, demonstrate how educational materials were produced in dialogue with lived political struggle. Publications such as *Sharing the Load* and *Working Women*, produced under LACOM, foregrounded the experiences of women workers and interrogated gendered inequalities within both the workplace and broader society. These texts did not merely describe injustice; they encouraged collective analysis and action. In doing so, SACHED functioned as more than an educational

provider; it operated as a site where democratic practice was rehearsed and enacted. Similarly, the development of African-centred history courses under Neville Alexander represented a significant epistemic intervention. At a time when Eurocentric curricula dominated higher education, the production of alternative materials challenged the colonial foundations of knowledge. This curricular shift reflects praxis in action: reorienting knowledge production to serve liberation.

Restoration of humanity and education as liberation

Freire's humanism insists that oppression dehumanises both the oppressed and the oppressor. Education must therefore aim at the restoration of humanity. In the South African context, apartheid and colonial education systems were explicitly designed to restrict black South Africans to subordinate labour roles (Christie, 1985). The denial of educational access was not incidental; it was structurally embedded in racial capitalism. Against this backdrop, SACHED's educational philosophy cannot be reduced to social mobility alone. Education was framed as liberation, a means of reclaiming intellectual agency and dignity. By creating spaces where students' experiences were validated, debated, and theorised, SACHED contributed to processes of rehumanisation that are central to radical pedagogy.

Convergence with African philosophies of education

Freire's ideas were not simply imported into the South African context; they resonated with existing anti-colonial intellectual traditions. The emphasis on consciousness, dignity, and collective transformation parallels key themes within African liberation thought and the philosophy of ubuntu, which foregrounds relational humanity and mutual recognition. Moreover, the intellectual climate shaped by Steve Biko and the Black Consciousness movement emphasised psychological liberation and the restoration of Black dignity. While SACHED was not a Black Consciousness organisation per se, its later pedagogical orientation operated within a political field transformed by these ideas. The convergence between Freirean thought and African liberation philosophies helps explain why radical pedagogy gained traction in the post-1976 period. This article does not argue that SACHED formally adopted Freirean pedagogy. Rather, it argues that SACHED's radical turn converged with Freirean principles in ways that illuminate its shift from liberal reformism to emancipatory praxis.

Finally, People's Education emerged in the mid-1980s in South Africa under the National Education Crisis Committee as communities, students, and teachers sought alternatives to apartheid schooling. Its ethos was

rooted in linking education to social struggle, forging alliances between learners, workers, and communities. Scholars such as Linda Chisholm and Bruce Fuller (1996), Peter Kallaway (2002), Elaine Unterhalter (1990), Enver Motala (2017), and Pam Christie (1985) highlight the tensions within People's Education between grassroots radicalism and reformist co-option. SACHED's work is intersected with this movement, situating its pedagogical practices within broader struggles for democratic, community-driven education.

Funding and Organisational Structure

SACHED was organised by centres and branches, with centres operating multiple projects while branches focused on a singular project across South Africa; these included Cape Town, Durban, Johannesburg, Grahamstown, Port Elizabeth, East London, Pietermaritzburg, Pretoria, Newcastle, and Bloemfontein (Nonyongo, 1998, p. 126).

As SACHED grew, its international donor funding increased, leading to SACHED becoming one of the largest non-state educational organisations in South Africa. According to a financial document found at the Mayibuye Centre, through various funders, SACHED had accumulated nearly four million rand by the early 1980s. However, according to Solomon

(1994), the amount was closer to ten million rand.

SACHED went from a volunteer-based organisation to a full-blown NGO, with formalised positions and employment contracts. SACHED's donors in the 1980s included World University Services, Chairman's Fund, Christian Aid, United Churches/Canada, Rockefeller, the American, French, Dutch, Australian and Canadian embassies, the Ford Foundation, and some others. The 1990s saw a significant curtailment of this funding to accommodate the negotiations which preceded the 1994 elections. The negotiations bore a false promise of democracy and a unified nation, however, and led to the demobilisation of the African National Congress's armed wing and the halting of mobilisation efforts that had been spearheaded by civic organisations in response to mass repression. The unions and students' and women's groups which had been instrumental in the mass mobilisation against the apartheid regime were terminated.

This, in turn, raised questions: Was professionalism compromised and radicalism diluted? Or did the scale of available finance increase political impact and reach? SACHED's radical bent was neither inevitable nor uncontested; it emerged through internal debate over the organisation's

sectarian stance and political alignment, and the meaning of alternative education in the rapidly changing liberation struggle context of the time.

SACHED consolidated its critical pedagogy into three projects: Community-based education, through LACOM; alternative higher education pathways, through Khanya College; and extended dialogical pedagogy into youth culture through *Upbeat* magazine.

Through LACOM, SACHED provided educational programmes and resources for trade unions, students, and community organisations. This was influenced by Black Consciousness Movement and people's education. Its projects included literacy projects for union workers and resource development. It therefore created How-To manuals (i.e., How to Have a Workshop, how to do Bookkeeping and How to take minutes of meeting), LACOM News, a SACHED-produced periodical and union-specific booklets which were relevant to each union or organisation. In 1984, at the behest of the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU), LACOM developed the English Literacy Project (ELP) for members of FOSATU. The ELP was developed to provide union workers with the appropriate reading ability and skills to understand their

unions and participate in union meetings wholeheartedly. LACOM also worked closely with the South African Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers Union [SACCAWU] and Learn and Teach to create Sharing the Load: The Struggle for Gender Equality, Parental Rights, and Childcare (LACOM, SACCAWU, Learn and Teach, 1990). The main argument of this publication was that the simple abolition of apartheid was not enough to enact true change and that true freedom meant freedom from class, racial and gender oppression and exploitation. It challenged the deeply rooted beliefs about relationships between men and women in our society. It aimed to inspire new ways of seeing oneself and one's role in the promising future that was opening in South Africa. (L. Vale, personal communication, January 24, 2024)

The Radical Turn in Practice

The period between 1978 and 1990 marked the decisive consolidation of SACHED's radical turn. While earlier initiatives had focused primarily on widening access to tertiary education within the constraints of apartheid legislation, the late 1970s and 1980s saw a qualitative shift: education was no longer framed simply as access to credentials but as a site of political struggle. This transformation unfolded

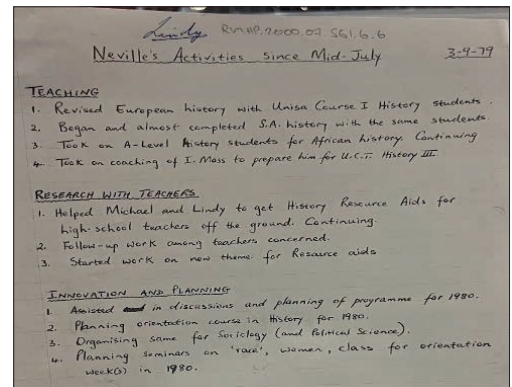
in the broader context of the resurgence of labour militancy, civic mobilisation, and debates about “people’s education” influenced by Black Consciousness. In this climate, SACHED increasingly aligned its pedagogical work with labour unions, community organisations, and youth formations.

The shift was not only ideological but institutional. Projects were reorganised, expanded, and reoriented toward collective study, political literacy, and community-based education. Earlier initiatives such as the Commerce and Enrichment Project evolved into more explicitly labour- and community-facing structures, culminating in the establishment of LACOM. At the same time, SACHED developed alternative higher education pathways through Khanya College, and together, these initiatives demonstrate how SACHED embedded radical democratic education across labour, tertiary, and youth spaces.

The following section examines LACOM, Khanya College, and *Upbeat* as institutional expressions of this radical turn. Through these projects, SACHED moved beyond liberal interventionism and consolidated an educational praxis rooted in collective struggle, critical inquiry, and transnational solidarity.

He (Neville Alexander) said, “Oh, sure, I’d love to do that, love to teach

there one day.” And he actually became a very great friend of ours long before he became the director of SACHED. But the moment he was unbanned, he did come and teach at SACHED. And I went away in 1980 or ’81 on sabbatical leave. And I said, “of course, you’re the acting director, and I may not come back as director,” because it was so obviously the right person. (L. Wilson, personal communication, January 23, 2024)

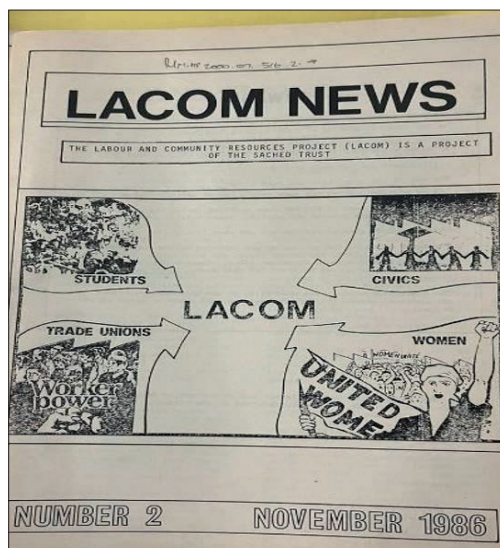


Lindy Wilson’s notes on Neville Alexander’s activities since mid-July 2-9-1970 (SACHED Collection. RIM.HP.2000.07.561.6.6. (Mayibuye Centre, UWC, Cape Town)

The Labour and Community Resources Project

LACOM was established in the 1980s and was born out of two earlier projects, the Commerce Project and the Enrichment Project, which appeared in 1978. LACOM had programmes running through all six of SACHED’s

centres. These programmes included: English Literacy, Basic Bookkeeping, Office Administration, Media Skills, and educational programmes for parents and students. I will be focusing on this project throughout my mini-thesis as it played a significant role in SACHED's community and union organising efforts during the civics movement. Enver Motala was an instrumental part of the LACOM project, and his chapter in *Reflections on Knowledge, Learning and Social Movements*, "Alternative education: Examining past experiences critically" (Motala, 2018), is an examination of SACHED's work and projects which underscores the political debates of the time, such as sectarianism and alternative education (Motala, 2017).



LACOM News, Number 2, November 1986
(SACHED Collection. RIM.HP.2000.07.516.2.4.
Mayibuye Centre, UWC, Cape Town)

LACOM was responsible for union- and community-based organisation and project developments, such as literacy projects for union workers and resource development. LACOM created the aforementioned publications, all of which assisted the support given to labour and community organisations through the Labour Support Organisation through skills development and the creation of resources.

Khanya College

Khanya College was established in Johannesburg in 1986 as a bridging programme for students leaping to the first year. These degrees were accredited by Indiana University and were SACHED's alternative model to the liberal universities' Eurocentric course material (Motala, 2017). However, Khanya College was more than a bridging programme: it embodied SACHED's attempt to contest Eurocentric curricula and build intellectual autonomy (Peter Vale, 1986).

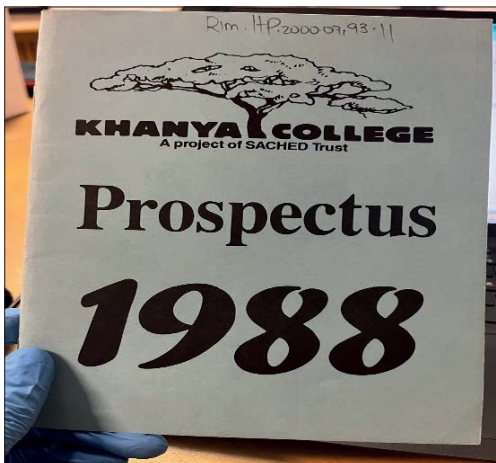
Khanya College was conceived both as an intervention to counter the exclusion of Black students from higher education and as a site for reimagining the future of the university itself (Samuel, 2024). Khanya College offered courses in African History, Sociology, Science and Chemistry

(Vale, 1986). Khanya was accredited through Indiana University, University of the Witwatersrand, University of Cape Town (UCT), UWC and the University of Kwa-Zulu-Natal.

Khanya College was more than a bridging programme: it embodied SACHED's attempt to contest Eurocentric curricula and build intellectual autonomy. This was evident in both its course content and its pedagogical methods. The curriculum foregrounded African history, labour studies, and community development alongside critical literacy and science, intentionally decentring the Western canon that dominated South African universities. Students engaged with thinkers such as Frantz Fanon, Amílcar Cabral, and Paulo Freire, linking theory to lived realities in workplaces

and townships. Teaching emphasised dialogue and collective inquiry rather than rote learning, and workshops were facilitated by activists and educators from trade unions and community organisations, blurring the line between academic study and social action. This reflected the experimental and contested nature of alternative higher education in the 1980s, where institutions like Khanya sought to redefine what counted as knowledge and who had the right to produce it (Vale, 1986).

Khanya College continues to operate as a social justice education centre, hosting the Khanya Journal and programmes in popular education, community media, and gender and labour studies. Its current initiatives, such as the Jozi Book Fair, Community Media School, and Education for Liberation Programme, extend the SACHED tradition into contemporary struggles against inequality, precarity, and epistemic exclusion. In this continuity, Khanya represents the living afterlife of SACHED's radical pedagogy: an evolving space where learning remains inseparable from activism and collective transformation (Adriansen et al., 2017; Alexander, 2023).



Khanya College 1988 Prospectus (SACHED Collection, RIM.HP.2000.07.93.11, Mayibuye Centre, UWC, Cape Town)

Upbeat magazine

With the turn to radical movements, the liberal framework was criticised

for its commitment to the status quo. SACHED responded with flexibility to crisis in the politics of education (Motala, 2017, p. 98)—with non-formal democratic education.

If LACOM embedded education within labour struggles and Khanya reimaged tertiary education, *Upbeat* extended SACHED's radical pedagogy into youth culture and media. Launched in the 1980s, the magazine was distributed in schools and designed for young readers navigating an increasingly politicised social landscape.



Upbeat no. 9, Nov/Dec 1995 (SACHED Collection, RIM.HP.2000.07.29.36, Mayibuye Centre, UWC, Cape Town).

Upbeat functioned as more than a magazine; it was a participatory educational tool. Its format encouraged dialogue through letters to the editor, reader contributions, quizzes, and debate sections such as Talkshop and Penfriends. Rather than transmitting information in a top-down manner, *Upbeat* created a communicative network among young readers, modelling dialogical pedagogy in print form. In this way, it embodied SACHED's commitment to democratic education: learning was inseparable from debate, self-reflection, and collective engagement.

The magazine would leave its readers with thought-provoking questions, such as “Why must women do the work?” and “Should boxing be banned in South Africa?” This also created a platform for young readers to share their answers. The wider goal of *Upbeat* was to create a network, developing a channel for communication and encouraging dialogue and debate. The magazine acted as an archive in and of itself, with each letter and request connecting as a trace or documentation of how the magazine functioned as a pedagogical tool.

Articles were written in accessible English. It invited critical discussion and self-reflection and was distributed to learners as early as Grade 1. *Upbeat* was a colourful medium; it was bright and bold, and funky, with vibrant

colours and contemporary stars featured on the cover. *Upbeat* reflected SACHED's non-sectarian nature through its transnational solidarity. The magazine would include pieces about struggles in Chile, Palestine, Namibia, and elsewhere, fostering international consciousness (Benson, 2023).

Taken together, LACOM, Khanya, and *Upbeat* demonstrate that SACHED's radical turn was not merely rhetorical. It was institutionalised across labour, tertiary, and youth spaces, embedding democratic pedagogy within the infrastructures of struggle. This transformation would extend beyond South Africa's borders, contributing to regional pedagogical networks, including those in Namibia.

Transnational Solidarity: SACHED and Namibia

There is a shared history and struggle between South Africa and Namibia. This is evident through oral history interviews with John Samuel, the National Director of SACHED in the 1980s, Ronny Dempers, a student-activist, and Ciraj Rassool, an educator in Cape Town and briefly in Namibia. The secondary literature shows that SACHED's programmes reached across the South African border into Namibia in the 1980s, particularly through bursary networks, the formation of Jakob Marengo Tutorial College (JMTC) and shared resources for critical pedagogy and adult education. These engagements were pragmatic, both by supporting students and activists excluded from



Upbeat Day, 17th April 1984 (SACHED Collection, RIM.HP.2000.07.361.3.41, Mayibuye Centre, UWC, Cape Town)

formal institutions and politics, and by building a regional pedagogic response to settler-colonial education.

There are historical linkages between resistance groups from Namibia and South Africa, both in exile and within both countries. South Africans who participated in the Yu Chi Chan Club, the National Liberation Front in 1962, like Neville Alexander (SACHED), and Namibians, like Otilie Abrahams (JMTC), were central in establishing the trans-national linkages between JMTC and Khanya College, as sites of reciprocal pedagogical exchange (Gamedze, 2024). Abrahams opened the path for Namibian students to access SACHED and Khanya College (Benson & Gamedze, 2017).

Ronny Dempers was a student who in the 1980s attended both JMTC in Namibia and Khanya College. He would go on to be an organiser in NANSO and continues to work in the NGO sector.

I think the growing of that critical mind, that questioning mind, that sometimes is not very comfortable, but that is what Jacob Morenga has produced. That is what Khanya College has produced. Questioning the system, challenging the system, working for a change. (R. Dempers, personal communication, February 6, 2026)

Dialogical pedagogy and transnational recruitment

Namibian students were recruited from activist networks in South Africa and Namibia (C. Rassool, personal communication, February 27, 2026). Khanya was therefore not simply admitting students; it was consolidating a politically conscious constituency. Dempers' recollection of "vibrant" classes structured around debate and group discussion further illustrates how this political orientation translated pedagogically. The emphasis on dialogue, contextualisation, and collective deliberation suggests that the college functioned less as a conventional bridging programme and more as a space of political-intellectual formation. (R. Dempers, personal communication, February 6, 2026)

Teaching techniques and practices underscored humility and humanness. Students were exposed to their own neglected histories in order to contextualise contemporary struggles. Exposure to African history facilitated critical consciousness and an awareness of issues confronting Namibia and South Africa. (C. Rassool, personal communication, February 27, 2026)

Rassool, who was a teacher at Khanya College, recalled the pedagogic dialogue with Namibian students:

It's got to be unique, a kind of humility and just a higher standard of care with your teaching, with your language, with your concepts, with your approaches, and of also understanding how. It's Namibian students, you know, like Gerson "Skue" Marenga, Elly Shipiki, Joy Sasman and Steve Katjiuanjo, who showed you that if you were not a mother tongue English speaker with perfect grammatical and syntactical English, you could still be an utterly brilliant writer and constructor of ideas and of essays in English. (C. Rassool, personal communication, February 27, 2026)

Irrespective of the course, the lecturers would encourage students to think critically. Dempers recalls Maths and Sciences lecturer Nai-iem Dollie's after-school political education sessions where they were introduced to Marxism, socialism, and Trotskyism:

We were getting real hard lessons of life about Marxism practice, and that is, those are the things that have really shaped us up. And that made us unhappy with the status quo, and we have always had to remain challenging the status quo and pushing things to become better. (R. Dempers, personal communication, February 6, 2026)

Training students to look at the world through a critical lens and enabling them to understand the parameters of the world and how the politics play into these ideals shaped the development of their critical thinking. The commitment to the development of critical consciousness permeated all pedagogic practices, as Dempers recalled:

We are still on platforms, different platforms, sharing really the same ideologies, and we are not part of the so-called formal systems of government, where many of us are in the NGO sphere continuing the work. So, whenever you meet people like John Samuel, please convey that the people that he has raised consciously or unconsciously continue to hold the torch and push on for a just society. (R. Dempers, personal communication, February 6, 2026)

Conclusion

SACHED's radical turn saw the emergence of projects that challenged the repressive state. The adoption and adaptation of Freirean theory is evident through its material development and production. Paulo Freire's theory of critical consciousness permeated SACHED's pedagogic programmes, LACOM, *Upbeat* magazine and Khanya College. SACHED's methods directly contributed to building democratic

forms of organisation among workers, students, and communities.

Its non-sectarian ethos, rooted in an insistence on “education for all” regardless of party or ideology, allowed it to collaborate across political and geographical boundaries. This openness enabled connections with liberation movements and adult education initiatives in spaces such as Namibia, where similar Freirean-inspired projects emerged. In this sense, SACHED’s pedagogy was not only anti-apartheid but also profoundly internationalist. SACHED remains an example of how education is political and a means to decolonise and conscientise oneself. SACHED’s ability to develop, evolve and collaborate was made possible through the freedom allotted to the people who were part of SACHED.

The thread connecting SACHED to Namibia presented itself through both people and practice. Many early NANSO organisers, including students from JMTC, adopted similar approaches in their mobilisation work, developing study groups, critical reading sessions, and democratic forums as part of their activism. These continuities show that SACHED’s ethos of “study as struggle” and critical pedagogy found new expression in Namibia’s student movement, where education again became a space of political formation and resistance.

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Challenges that Outsmart the Transformation Agenda: An Analysis of Why Certain Challenges Persist in the Namibian Education System Despite Several Reforms

John Nyambe, Marius Kudumo, & Ellison Tjirera

Abstract:

With an analytical framework constructed from Bhaskar's critical realist theory of ontology, the study adopted the qualitative research methodology to investigate barriers that impede the implementation of Namibia's transformation agenda in

education, and the underlying causal factors responsible for these barriers, as well as the possible way forward to ensure successful implementation of the transformation agenda. The study identified several observable barriers that existed in the domain of the



Namibia's transformation agenda in education still faces many obstacles. Source: Dirk Haarmann

ontological layer of the empirical, with the neoliberal ideological orientation as the underpinning causal force responsible for these barriers. The study argued that the neoliberal agenda is the underlying causal mechanism located within the ontological layer of the real. The study observed that the transformation agenda lacked ontological depth and restricted its activities within the surface-level domain of the empirical. The surface level transformation resulted in certain challenges persisting in the Namibian education system, and outsmarting several reform initiatives. The study recommends a transformation process that adopts a depth perspective to transform not only the observable surface level challenges, but also the deeper level factors that give rise to these surface level factors.

Keywords: transformation agenda, critical realism, ontological depth, knowledge-based economy

Introduction

What kind of education, for whom, and for what purpose? We pose these critical questions at the onset to frame our study. In this study, we investigate factors that impede the successful implementation of Namibia's transformation agenda in education, and the underlying causal mechanisms/ factors responsible for these impeding issues. We achieve this by revisiting important historical epochs, contextualising

several key education reforms that were undertaken, as well as unpacking contemporary challenges, and pointing to some prospects of what could be done to improve the education system. Broadly conceived, education is an important social institution that plays an essential role in personal, social and economic development. Invariably, the kind of education pursued by each country influences its path of development.

In this study, we focus on Namibia's transformation agenda in education. We seek to understand the factors that constrain the implementation of the transformation agenda, the underlying causal mechanisms responsible for these factors, and the possible actions that could be taken to ensure effective implementation of the agenda. We therefore ask the following questions:

- i. What factors impede the implementation of Namibia's transformation agenda in education?
- ii. What are the underlying causal mechanisms that are responsible for these impeding issues?
- iii. What could be done to ensure effective implementation of Namibia's transformation agenda in education?

We adopt the qualitative document analysis approach to source data for the

study, while at the same time drawing conceptual and analytical insights from Bhaskar's critical realist theory of ontology (Bhaskar, 1978, 2008). Despite its contextual boundedness to Namibia, the study offers lessons and insights into other contexts that are pursuing post-colonial transformation agendas in education.

Historical Context

We contextualise Namibia's education within five important historical epochs. First, is the indigenous education, which existed in Namibia prior to the German and apartheid South African colonial rule (Salia-Bao, 1991). As elsewhere on the African continent, indigenous Namibian education had its epistemic foundations centred on knowledge, skills, cultural traditions, values, and attitudes that were intended to reproduce and perpetuate continuity of respective communities (MacOjong, 2008; Mushi, 2009; Njoki, 2015). Indigenous Namibian education was founded upon the principle of responsiveness to individual and societal needs, combining both theoretical and practical knowledge, with the pedagogical facilitation of learning viewed as a responsibility for all adult members of society (Ellis, 1984).

With the German colonial occupation of 1884–1914, indigenous education deteriorated. Driven by their insatiable

greed and obsession for land which resulted in mass extermination of some indigenous communities that resisted forceful land grabbing, the Germans completely neglected education of the indigenous Namibian communities. With their interest centred on land grabbing, the Germans left education for indigenous communities in the hands of the missionaries. Yet, with its vision of producing servants and labourers for the German masters, missionary education was restricted to “instilling the values of obedience, order, punctuality, sobriety, honesty, diligence and moderation” (Cohen, 1994, p. 67). Thus, with its self-proclaimed duty of converting and civilizing the purportedly pagan Africans, missionary education for indigenous Namibians did not go beyond the teaching of basic literacy necessary for reading the Bible, hymn books, catechism and other evangelical literature (Cohen, 1994).

The shift from missionary education to that applied by apartheid South Africa (1915–1990) did not bring about any improvement in education for Namibian indigenous communities. Instead, apartheid South Africa, through the Afrikaner-supported National Party which came to power in 1948, installed and entrenched the apartheid ideology of Bantu Education through the Bantu Education Act (47 of 1953), which emanated

from the work of the 1949 Eiselen Commission. The Commission was appointed by the apartheid regime to examine and make recommendations for a separate education system for the black indigenous communities. Underpinned by its segregationist and racist virtues, the Bantu education system was determined to inculcate values of tribal consciousness (tribalism), separate communities and development, and white privilege and supremacy. The Bantu Education Policy propagated a white dominated society, with whites positioned as the standard of humanity to be admired, and always associated with wealth and knowledge. Black people, on the other hand, had their visions and aspirations clipped and restricted to the horizons of their tribal villages.

The deplorable situation in education was characterised by a legalised ethnically and racially segregated education system for blacks, coloureds, and whites. The separate education systems were not only unequal, but differed in both quality and quantity, with white education being of superior quality, followed by that for coloureds, and at the lowest level, that for blacks (Department of Education and Publicity, SWAPO [South West Africa People's Organisation] 1981, p. 151). Thus, the discriminatory apartheid laws ensured that education for whites was superior to that of

blacks, reserving subjects in the fields of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) for whites only (Mbamba, 1981; O'Callaghan, 1977). While the education system endeavoured to develop the STEM capabilities of white learners to take up STEM jobs in industry, blacks were being prepared for jobs that required unskilled and semi-skilled labour (Isaac, 2022). Not only did the curricula at black schools exclude STEM subjects, but teachers in these schools were grossly underqualified, which was a deliberate move by the apartheid regime to deny the offering of subjects with high cognitive demands at these schools (Isaac, 2022; Mbamba, 1981; O'Callaghan, 1977). Education constituted a centrepiece of the larger part of the apartheid scheme, which focused on perpetuating disparities in education provision among different ethnic groups, serving as an oppressive mechanism for blacks, as well as protecting and strengthening white minority political and economic privileges (Pomuti et al., 2003; Angula & Lewis, 1997).

The apartheid Bantu Education policy was not consistent with the values and vision of the new Namibia. Consequently, at independence in 1990, a major overhaul and education transformation was embarked upon. Structures and institutions such as the National Institute for Educational Development (NIED)

were established to guide curricular development and implementation. A transformational agenda in education was thus articulated after independence in Namibia. Several reforms have since been embarked upon. Yet, the same challenges keep reappearing despite the reforms. This study investigates the challenges that impeded the successful implementation of Namibian post-apartheid transformation in education and the underlying causal mechanisms responsible for the impeding factors.

Namibia's Transformation Agenda in Education

The search for a transformation agenda in education dates back to the days of the liberation struggle, culminating in a myriad of educational pronouncements and policies shortly after independence in early 1990. These policies included:

- *National Integrated Education System for Emergent Namibia: A Draft Proposal for Education Reform and Renewal*
- *Education in Transition: Nurturing our Future – A Transitional Policy Statement on Education and Training in the Republic of Namibia*
- *Change with Continuity: Education Reform Directive*

Other policy statements that aided the conceptualisation included:

- *Basic Education Reform Initiative*
- *Language Policy*
- *Junior Secondary Curriculum Reform*
- *Reform and Development of Examinations and Assessment Procedures*
- *Development of the National Institute for Educational Development*
- *Education Bill*
- *Development of Adult and Non-formal Education*
- *Policy establishing the National Commission for UNESCO* (Ministry of Education and Culture [MEC], 1993)

The policy documents culminated in the 1993 centrepiece policy on education: *Toward Education for All: A Development Brief for Education, Culture and Training* (MEC, 1993). The *Toward Education for All* policy document articulated the reform agenda through the four major goals of education, namely, *access*, *equity*, *quality* and *democracy*. *Access* entails addressing and eliminating past discriminatory practices where education was reserved for certain racial groups and was not for all. *Equity*, on the other hand, entails providing expanded equitable access to schooling and its benefits, while the goal of *quality* denotes a broader approach which encompasses, among others learning

outcomes, pedagogical approaches, and well-prepared teachers. *Democracy* entails schools that represent the values of a democratic society, including parent and learner broad participation in decision-making, and learning and teaching (MEC, 1993). These four goals constituted the hallmark of the transformation agenda in education.

With the crafting of Vision 2030 in 2004, the *Education for All* transformation agenda was given a new perspective, positioning education and its major four goals, as the driving engine in the transition to a knowledge-based economy. With aspirations for accelerated economic growth, and equitable social development for all, including employment creation and poverty eradication, Vision 2030 envisioned an education that can champion the creation and application of knowledge, technology, skills, innovation and entrepreneurship as means to achieve a high-income knowledge-based economy (Government of the Republic of Namibia [GRN], 2004).

However, education was found to be a weak link for supporting transition to a high-income knowledge-based economy that is underpinned by high quality of life for all and eradication of poverty. Consequently, the Education and Training Sector Improvement Programme (ETSIP) was crafted as a major turn-around strategy to

align the education sector with the expectations bestowed upon it by Vision 2030. The key objectives of the fifteen-year ETSIP programme were to substantially enhance the education sector's contribution to the transition to a knowledge-based economy, enhance the provision of a skilled labour force in the immediate future to improve knowledge-driven productivity growth, and contribute to the attainment of equitable social development by adopting pro-poor approaches in the distribution of quality education and employment opportunities. The ETSIP constituted a key aspect of the Namibian transformation agenda in education.

Analytical Framework

The analytical framework for the study was constructed using concepts drawn from the critical realist theory of reality of Bhaskar (1978, 2008). Concepts drawn from Bhaskar's theory enabled the study to go beyond the surface level of factors impeding the implementation of Namibia's transformation agenda to uncover and investigate the underlying causal mechanisms responsible for these factors. The study leveraged the powers of ontological depth offered by Bhaskar's concepts to uncover the often hidden, and the not-so-readily observable causal mechanisms/factors that operate at the deeper level of reality, but have causal capacity to produce effects in educational transformation. In particular, the study used five

key concepts from Bhaskar's critical realist theory namely, the concepts of empirical, actual, real, emergence, and causal mechanisms.

Bhaskar (1978, 2008) argued that reality consists of three layers, or levels, namely: the *empirical*, the *actual*, and the *real*. The *empirical* consists of our perceptions, experiences and observations of reality. For the present study, this includes perceptions, experiences and observations in our schools of factors such as the shortage of classrooms and materials for learning and teaching, the lack of sanitation facilities for both learners and teachers, and the lack of a water supply in some schools. These are factors that we can observe and experience. Bhaskar therefore argued that the *empirical* accounts for unstable knowledge, as it does not provide an explanation of why things exist as they do. The *empirical* must therefore be explored further to uncover what is responsible for people's perceptions, observations and experiences of reality.

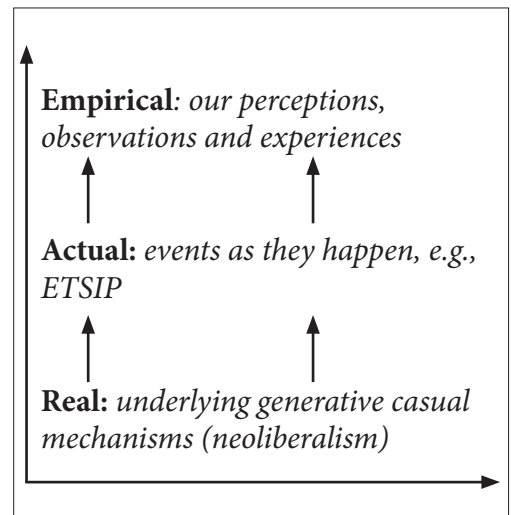
Bhaskar's theory provides the next level to be explored, which is the level of the *actual*. This level consists of the objective world of events, which includes all things that happen, even if we do not experience them. The level of the *actual* is about existing events or phenomena. For instance, this includes the transformation process in the Namibian education system. Like the *empirical*, the

level of the *actual* generates unstable and unreliable knowledge that is accessible through the senses and does not explain why things happen as they do.

As is the case with the level of the *empirical*, the level of the *actual* should be explored further to generate knowledge that is stable and can provide understanding of why things happen as they do. This leads to the next level, which is the level of the *real*. The level of the *real* is stable, and may not be immediately observable. It consists of underlying mechanisms/factors that have causal effects that explain why things happen as they do.

The analytical framework is presented graphically as follows:

Figure 1 Analytical framework (constructed by the authors using Bhaskar's concepts)



In Figure 1 above, the layers of the real, the actual and the empirical are positioned in a vertical relationship to demonstrate the concept of depth ontology, with the level of the real positioned at the bottom, deeper end of reality, while the actual and the empirical are positioned at the surface level of reality. With the vertical positioning of the levels of reality in Figure 1, the concepts of emergence and causal mechanisms entail that the underlying layer of the real possesses emergent properties and causal powers which, when activated, gives rise to the next level above it (Bhaskar, 2008, p. 23). Bhaskar argued that the concepts of causal mechanisms and emergence underpin the social world and explain why things happen as they do. The concept of causal mechanism is used to refer to factors, properties or elements that have causal powers that can lead to occurrences in a given ontological layer.

Methods

Data for the study were sourced through the qualitative document analysis methodology, which entailed analysing written materials about the phenomenon under investigation (Johnson & Christensen, 2014). Purposive sampling (Patton, 2002) was applied to select the following texts because they contained essential information on Namibia's transformation agenda in education:

- 1999 *Presidential Commission on Education, Culture and Training* (Volumes 1 & 3), also popularly known as the Turner Reports (Volumes 1 & 3)
- *Toward Education for All* policy document
- *Education and Training Sector Improvement Plan* (ETSIP)
- *Education Statistics* (2020–2024) (Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture [MEAC] Education Management Information System (EMIS) reports)

Data were analysed using the qualitative thematic data analysis technique, which involved intensive reading and re-reading of the documents, identifying patterns and themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The thematic analysis was supported by application of the analytical framework which was constructed from Bhaskar's theory of reality. Despite using data sources located in the public domain, the researchers adhered to ethical considerations, such as being objective and truthfully reporting the findings. While Namibia's transformation agenda is being implemented across the education sector, including technical and vocational training, and higher education, the focus on general education (grades 1 to 12) was a deliberate choice by the researchers given that the identified challenges were more prominent in this subsector.

Findings

The findings are presented under seven themes that are by no means exhaustive. These include limited classroom facilities; lack of sanitation; lack of electricity and internet access; lack of teacher housing facilities; inefficiency and wastage; mismatch between teacher qualifications and learner performance; and learner-centred pedagogy.

Limited classroom facilities

As alluded to earlier, one of the critical priorities of Namibia's transformation agenda in education is to achieve accelerated access to education through pro-poor expansion and distribution of educational opportunities to enable equitable access to competencies and skills for a high-income knowledge-based economy, and employment creation and poverty eradication through equitable social development. EMIS data spanning the years 2020 to 2024 were analysed to examine barriers or impediments to accelerated and equitable access to education in the context of a pro-poor approach as envisioned by the transformation agenda. While significant achievements pertaining to the provision of classroom facilities to enable equitable access to education are acknowledged, data revealed limited classroom facilities in

some schools as a major constraint to the transformation agenda of equitable access to education for all.

Thus, despite progress reported in providing permanent classroom structures (modern structures constructed out of bricks) in some schools, the 2020 to 2024 EMIS reports consistently bemoaned the case of learners in some rural schools who are still being taught in traditional (inferior) classroom structures constructed by communities using traditional (unsuitable) materials such as wooden poles, mud, grass, or corrugated iron sheets. In some rural schools, the situation was deplorable, with learners still being taught under trees. Throughout the 2020 to 2024 EMIS reports, the 'under-tree' classrooms were euphemised as "outdoor teaching spaces" or "outdoor classrooms". While the concept of outdoor teaching spaces carries pedagogic merit, it does not hold when it refers to spaces under trees which schools have no choice but to use due to limited or non-existent classroom facilities.

The extent to which traditional structures and outdoor classrooms were prevalent was reported in the EMIS at national level as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 *Traditional structures and outdoor classrooms*

Year	Traditional structures	Outdoor classrooms
2020	2,123	186
2021	2,197	142
2022	2,138	110
2023	2,037	181
2024	2,056	222

Source: EMIS reports

Kavango West, Kavango East, Zambezi, Ohangwena and Kunene regions had the highest incidence of outdoor teaching spaces and classrooms in traditional structures. In the 2020 EMIS, Kavango West had 28 outdoor classrooms (classrooms under trees), Kunene had 28, Ohangwena had 20, while Zambezi reported 29 (MEAC, 2020, p. 69). Interestingly, in 2024, Khomas Region reported 34 classrooms in traditional facilities, joining the ranks of Ohangwena Region, which also reported 34 such classrooms. Kavango East, Kavango West, Omusati and Zambezi still dominated the list of regions with a high number of traditional and outdoor classrooms in 2024. It should also be noted that these regions are situated in the poverty-stricken northern belt of Namibia. Yet, despite the regional inequalities in the distribution of classroom facilities, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) observed in its *Namibia Budget Brief: Education 2024/2025* (UNICEF Namibia, 2024, p. 9):

Namibia’s expenditure pattern is characterised by inequalities as shown by the weak correlation between allocation for development projects by regions. Regions with high multidimensional poverty do not necessarily receive proportionate per capita allocation. For example, based on regional allocations for development projects in the 2024/25 budget, regions with the highest rates of child multidimensional poverty (East and West Kavango) tend to get less than those with low poverty (//Kharas, Khomas). Similarly, regions with the greatest classroom gaps (Ohangwena, Omusati, [East Kavango and West Kavango]) do not necessarily get the largest share of the development budget.

The lack of facilities such as classrooms can be a disincentive, discouraging qualified teachers from taking up teaching positions at such schools, and thus negatively affecting learning outcomes. Conversely, the

availability of facilities at well-resourced schools serves as an incentive, attracting qualified teachers to such schools. Therefore, the disparities in the provision of classroom facilities stand in stark contrast to the ideals of equity advocated in the transformation agenda. These disparities are perpetuated by the inequalities in budget allocations for development projects, as seen in the UNICEF report cited above, which still favour regions with low poverty levels such as Khomas Region.

We argue that the phenomenon of classrooms under trees, or classrooms in traditional structures, serves as a barrier to the successful implementation of the transformation agenda of equitable access to quality education that is intended to drive transition to a knowledge-based economy, employment creation, poverty eradication and equitable social development for all. Learners attending classrooms under trees are likely to face harsh weather conditions such as rain and wind, and could also face general disturbances. Similarly, it could be very cold in traditional structures during the winter season, while classrooms made from corrugated iron sheets might be extremely hot in summer.

Lack of sanitation facilities

Data available in the EMIS reports (2020 to 2024) further revealed that

some schools in the rural areas still did not have sanitation facilities such as toilets for learners, toilets for teachers, or a potable water supply. The 2020 to 2024 EMIS reports revealed that at the national level, in 2020 a total of 225 schools did not have toilets for learners, while 186 schools did not have toilets for teachers. In 2021, there were 208 schools without toilets for learners while another 208 schools did not have toilets for teachers. In 2023, a total of 205 schools were without toilets for learners, while 319 schools lacked toilets for teachers. In 2024, the number of schools without toilets for learners stood at 224, while the number of schools without toilets for teachers was the highest at 356. It can only be imagined how difficult it can be to spend a whole day, let alone a whole year, at a school without toilet facilities. We argue that the lack of toilet facilities for learners and teachers in some schools served as barriers against Namibia's transformation agenda of equitable access to quality education. The possibility that learners and teachers in the affected schools had to use alternative toilet facilities such as the bush had consequences in terms of learner self-esteem, and general hygiene.

Aggravating the poor sanitation situation, some schools in rural areas were reported as not having a water supply. The lack of a water supply in some cases compounded the fact that

there were no toilets for both learners and teachers in these schools. At the national level, a total of 208 schools did not have a water supply in 2020, in 2021 there were 123 schools without a water supply, while in 2023 and 2024 the number of schools without a water supply stood at 95 and 107, respectively (MEAC, 2020, 2021, 2023 2024).

The 2020 EMIS reported:

There has been a remarkable improvement in the provision of sanitary services to schools country wide. However, the Kavango East and Kavango West Regions remain the most poorly serviced Regions with 65.7% and 66.3% respectively of schools having toilets for learners, and the only Regions with below 80% provision of such services to schools. (Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture, 2021, p. 71 [emphasis, added])

Regarding water supply, the EMIS report continued: “There has also been an increase in water supply to schools, with the Kavango East and Kavango West Regions being the most poorly serviced with water supply at 87.1% and 83.1% respectively” (MEAC, 2021, p. 71 [emphasis, added]).

It is interesting to note that throughout the period 2020–2024, Kavango West and Kavango East dominated the list

of regions with schools that do not have toilets for learners and teachers, as well as the absence of a water supply. In 2022, other regions also reported the same challenge. Hardap Region reported 55 schools without toilets for teachers, Khomas Region reported 20 such schools, Kunene 27, and Zambezi 20. Kavango East had 64 schools with no toilets for teachers (MEAC, 2022, p. 71). Regrettably, however, the development budget is still skewed away from the poverty-stricken regions, as seen in the UNICEF Namibia Budget Brief 2024/2025 (UNICEF Namibia, 2024).

Lack of electricity supply, telephone and internet connectivity

In some schools, the absence of facilities, including electricity supply, and telephone and internet connectivity, constrained the implementation of the transformation agenda in education. In 2020, a total of 336 schools did not have electricity. Similarly, in 2021, a total of 336 schools did not have electricity. The number dropped to 200 schools in 2022, increased again to 217 schools in 2023, and dropped to 190 schools in 2024. Throughout the period 2020–2024, EMIS consistently acknowledged that “having no electricity places constraints on the equipment schools can use, and it makes it difficult to use school facilities after dark” (MEAC, 2020, p. 72).

Given the national aspiration to transition to a knowledge-based economy that is contingent upon knowledge creation and implementation, and entrepreneurship, the lack of electricity in some schools poses a serious constraint to learning and teaching. For instance, a school may not run a computer lab given the lack of electricity. “Although provision of electricity to schools has somewhat improved, tireless efforts in providing electricity to more schools in certain regions are still needed. *Kavango West is the only Region below 80%*” (MEAC, 2021, p. 72 [emphasis, added]).

Kavango West is again one of the regions which is under-serviced in terms of electricity supply. In this regard, the EMIS reported: “The disparities in the provision of telephone services were most notable in Kavango West, Zambezi, Kavango East, Ohangwena and Oshikoto Regions representing regions which are still highly underserved (MEAC, 2020, p. 72).

The lack of telephone services constrains communication, for instance with advisory teachers and other support systems at regional offices, as well as with parents and service providers. This situation may, however, have been addressed by the introduction of mobile communication devices such as mobile phones. Closely connected to telephonic communication is internet connectivity.

Internet connectivity as well as the presence of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) at schools have become an integral part of education and have proven to enhance learning and school administration. There are 1,231 or 63.0% out of 1,954 schools who have indicated the presence of Internet connectivity. This includes both cable and wireless modes. (MEAC, 2021, p. 72)

However, the distribution of internet connectivity was found to be uneven, as the EMIS reported:

//Karas, Khomas and Erongo (mostly urban areas) regions have more connected schools, while the Kavango West, Kavango East and Zambezi Regions are poorly connected. The Ministry might need to re-examine its partnership with network service providers to focus more on the poorly serviced regions to ensure that learners and teachers in those regions are not left out. (MEAC, 2021, p. 72 [emphasis, added])

Once again, the distribution of internet connectivity negatively affected the pro-poor equitable expansion of access to education demanded by the transformation agenda. For the period 2020 to 2024, Kavango West and Kavango East dominated the ranks of regions under-served with internet connectivity.

Table 2 *Learners repeating grades 1, 4 and 10 (percentage)*

Year	Grade 1			Grade 4			Grade 10		
	Total	Female	Male	Total	Female	Male	Total	Female	Male
2020	17.9%	15.0%	20.6%	18.1%	13.9%	21.9%	12.7%	12.5%	12.9%
2021	12.5%	10.7%	14.1%	7.5%	5.7%	9.1%	5.9%	5.9%	6.0%
2022	17.3%	13.9%	20.5%	18.3%	12.8%	23.5%	21.3%	21.5%	21.1%
2023	17.2%	20.9%	13.6%	19.0%	25.1%	13.3%	25.4%	22.4%	28.7%
2024	18.4%	14.2%	22.9%	21.3%	15.2%	27.8%	23.6%	27.2%	20.5%

Source: EMIS reports 2020-2024

Lack of teacher housing facilities in some rural schools

The last facility that we considered is the provision of teacher housing at schools. The data reflected that 1,222 schools in 2020 did not have teacher housing. Similarly, 1,222 schools in 2021 did not have teacher housing, while 763 schools did not have this facility in 2022. For 2023 and 2024, the numbers of schools without teacher housing stood at 1,248 and 1,039, respectively. We were mindful in handling this aspect that teachers have access to housing allowance through which they can buy their own houses. Similarly, teachers in remote rural areas are compensated with a “hardship” allowance to address issues such as housing.

Often, many teachers opt to buy houses in urban areas and commute to schools every day, sometimes travelling close to a hundred kilometres daily. The consequences of this practice include teacher fatigue, late arrival at schools, absenteeism, earlier departure

from schools in the afternoons, and possibly taking up positions at schools where they do not have to drive such long distances every day. Teacher commuting therefore has a negative bearing on learners in terms of access to quality of learning.

Inefficiency and wastage

Another challenge evident in the EMIS data was that of inefficiency and wastage through grade repetition by many learners. Grade repetition indicates poor quality education, and entails wastage and inefficient utilisation of resources in that the government spends the same amount and provides the same resources twice or more times for a learner repeating a grade. Similarly, the learner and the learner’s family invest the same amount of resources (funds, energy, time and emotional investment) more than once per grade. Through grade repetition, the learner occupies space that could otherwise have been vacated for other

learners who should have been in the grade at that time. The EMIS reports showed that grades 1, 4 and 10 were dominating repetition rates. The situation for grades 1, 4 and 10 over the five-year period (2020–2024) is given in Table 2.

The EMIS reports further indicated that throughout the grades, the prevalence of repetition was higher among male than female learners. This observation by EMIS is consistent with the Zimba et al. (2023) study which highlighted the educational underachievement of Namibian boys. Several underlying causes (some of which are identified in the Zimba et al. (2023) study) include: domestic responsibilities such as household chores; child-headed families; poor nutrition; and child labour. We argue that grade repetition represents the inefficiencies and wastage in the Namibian education which the transformation agenda was intended to address. Grade repetition militates against the key objectives of the transformation agenda such as access and quality.

Inefficiencies and wastage are further manifested in the development budget execution, as observed by UNICEF Namibia Budget Brief: Education 2024/2025:

... the development budget is often not fully utilized. This becomes a

twin problem of low allocation (averaging 2.8% of the [MEAC] budget) and low execution. Driven by procurement delays, lengthy construction approval, and delayed releases, amongst others, development budget execution averaged 96.6% of available resources (UNICEF Namibia, 2024, p. 2)

These inefficiencies pertaining to development budget execution are compounded by the unequal budgetary allocation between the poorer and wealthier regions.

Mismatch between improved teacher qualifications and learner performance

One of the critical priorities of the transformation agenda is provision of pro-poor access to high quality education, ensuring consistency with competencies proven to be critical for effective functioning in a knowledge-based economy (GRN, 2007). To investigate factors that enable or constrain the implementation of the transformation agenda with regards to quality, we examined data pertaining to teacher qualifications and learner performance, particular in the senior grades. We regarded teacher qualifications and learner performance as key indicators of quality in a transformation agenda that advocates for transition to a knowledge-based economy.

A key finding was that teacher qualifications seem to have improved progressively during the period 2020–2024. According to the EMIS report:

Out of 31,462 teachers, 1,722 (1,283 female and 439 male) had no teaching qualifications. This translates to 5.5% of all teachers having no teaching qualification. Looking at the gender perspective, 6.1% of all female teachers and 4.2% of all male teachers had no teaching qualifications. Of all teachers, 27,547 (87.6%) had a teaching qualification of more than 2 years tertiary education, of whom about 65.7% were females. (MEAC, 2020, p. 50)

The report continued:

Nationally, 97.7% of the teachers in secondary phase had a formal teacher training, of which 94.7% had a qualification of 3 or more years. Omaheke had the lowest percentage of qualified teachers in secondary phase, while Omusati was highest with 97.6%. A total of 2.3% of secondary phase teachers had no formal professional qualification (MEAC, 2020, p. 52)

While we note the disparities in the distribution of qualified teachers across the regions, favouring regions that are predominantly urban, the improvement in teacher qualifications should

be acknowledged. However, teacher qualifications are not the only factor responsible for learner performance, and the data revealed a discrepancy or disjuncture between teacher qualifications and learner performance. The data suggests that improved teacher qualifications did not necessarily translate into improved learner performance at the national examinations for the Namibia Senior Secondary Certificate Ordinary (NSSCO) level, Namibia Senior Secondary Certificate Higher (NSSCH) level, and the Namibia Senior Secondary Certificate Advanced Subsidiary (NSSCAS) level. In 2020, the picture was as follows:

A total of 32,377 learners sat for the NSSC-H nationally, out of which 29,109 were scored 1 to 4 points (89.9%), while 3,271 learners (10.1%) were either ungraded or graded incomplete. The majority of NSSC-H learners nationally scored grade 3 translating into 42.7% of the national point distribution. (Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture, 2020, p. 43 [emphasis, added])

The distribution of learners who were graded 1 to 4 were as follows: grade 1: 2.5%; grade 2: 16.7%; grade 3: 42.7%; and grade 4: 24.2%. Grade 1 represents the highest performance on the NSSC-H. Evidently, very few students scored in the highest performance

grades (e.g., grades 1 and 2), while the majority of learners scored in the lower performance grades (grades 3 and 4). While such learner performance is not in step with improved teacher qualifications, we also argue that low performance grades militate against the transformation agenda that demands high levels of knowledge creation and implementation, entrepreneurship and innovation in the transition to a knowledge-based economy. Initial steps towards a knowledge-based economy require learner performance at high school level in the upper grades (1 and 2) of the NSSC-H. Also, it should be noted that admission requirements at most universities in the ETSIP STEM fields favour high performing grades.

The ETSIP document further reported that many students in the ETSIP priority subjects for the NSSCO 2019 examinations scored symbols of D, E, F and G for Biology, English, Geography, Mathematics and Physical Science. Again, we argue that these symbols do not lay a strong foundation for a society aspiring for a transformation agenda that is driven by knowledge creation and implementation, innovation and entrepreneurship for equitable social development.

In the NSSCO, the grades are allocated from A* to G, with A* representing the highest performance. EMIS

reported a preponderance of D symbols in 2020. Similarly, the NSSCO situation regarding low performance grades or symbols was not any better in 2022. Close to half of the NSSCO candidates (41.1%) obtained a D symbol on the national quality symbols distribution.

In 2023, the concentration of candidates with low performance grades resembled the 2020, 2021 and 2022 scenarios in that the majority of the NSSCO examination candidates scored a D symbol, which translated to 18% of the national symbol distribution. The 2023 national symbol distribution was as follows: 4.1% of the candidates scored A, 1% scored A*, 9% scored B, 15% scored C, 18% scored symbol D, and 17% scored symbol E. Once again, the percentage of candidates is higher in the low performance symbols (D and E) and lower in the higher performance symbols (A*, A and B). This wastage that the system must endure through candidates who do not make it to tertiary education and may resit their NSSCO examinations has implications for the transformation agenda.

In 2024, again most candidates obtained C and D symbols in the NSSCAS subjects (national averages of 22.9% and 24%, respectively).

In terms of equitable access to opportunities that are required for the knowledge-based economy, it is impor-

tant to note that centres offering the NSSCAS subjects were concentrated more in regions such as Khomas, which had a total of 27,628 candidates, than in regions such as Kunene, that had only 1%, or 281 candidates. The unequal distribution of NSSCAS centres reflects unequal learner access to higher education opportunities and the competencies that are required for the envisaged high-income knowledge-based economy, employment creation, poverty reduction and equitable social development.

Learner-centred pedagogy as the means for achieving the goal of democracy

One of the four major goals of the transformation agenda is that of *democracy*. The policy document, *Toward Education for All* (MEC, 1993) positioned learner-centred pedagogy as a means for inculcating democracy in learning and teaching. Under learner-centred pedagogy, the teacher becomes a facilitator—no longer the purportedly dominant authority. The learner becomes an active participant who not only constructs knowledge, but participates in determining how he or she should be taught. The pedagogy advocates constructivist approaches to learning and teaching.

While the democratic underpinnings of learner-centred pedagogy sound

attractive to Namibia given the history of Bantu Education domination and oppression in classrooms, we argue that learner-centred pedagogy is likely to act as a barrier to successful implementation of the transformation agenda in education. One of the challenges with learner-centred pedagogy is its adoption as a one-size-fits-all pedagogy, a universal pedagogy, or a world-pedagogy, that does not consider unique pedagogical contexts, but must be implemented as a universal panacea for all learning problems. The universal nature of the pedagogy is popularised by institutions such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and United Nations institutions such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and UNICEF.

Yet scholars from the Global South such as Tabulawa (2003, p. 10) have argued that “to date there is no study that has conclusively established that learner-centred pedagogy is necessarily superior to traditional teaching in third world countries in terms of improving students’ achievement in test scores.” Instead, Tabulawa (2003, p. 10) argues that “learner-centred pedagogy serves to mask or camouflage a hidden agenda, a political agenda or ideology that promotes the interests of neoliberalism by facilitating western capitalist penetration and expansion under the guise of democratisation”.

Through the inculcation of blurred (or democratic) power relations between learners and teachers in the classrooms, western-oriented social relations, which are a precondition for western capitalist penetration and expansion, flourish. O'Sullivan (2010) concurred that in most of sub-Saharan Africa, learner-centred pedagogy came as part of donor-funded curriculum reforms, mainly with World Bank funding, with the pedagogy imposed as a condition for accessing donor funding.

The pedagogy has been further criticised for downplaying the significant role of the teacher in scaffolding learner access to school knowledge, as well as denying learners access to academic knowledge by over-emphasising their everyday knowledge through the so-called learner-construction of knowledge. While the pedagogy has direct implications for the goal of democracy, in the Namibian transformation agenda, it is also purported to enable equitable access to learning and improve the quality of educational provision. Yet, the pedagogy is not consistent with African cultural values, particularly in the power relations between children and adults, where adults are still seen as sources of authority and knowledge.

We argue that instead of improving the quality of learning, and the purported goal of democracy, learner-

centred pedagogy may serve as an impediment to the attainment of the transformation agenda in education.

Discussion

This study set out to investigate factors that impede the implementation of Namibia's transformation agenda in education, the underlying causal mechanisms that are responsible for these factors, and a possible way forward to ensure successful implementation of Namibia's transformation agenda. The findings are discussed within the context of the three levels of the analytical framework.

The ontological level of the empirical

At the ontological level of the *empirical*, the findings revealed several factors that impede the successful implementation of Namibia's transformation agenda in education. Data revealed several barriers at the level of the *empirical*, which are consistent with our perceptions, observations and experiences. These included: limited classrooms; lack of sanitation facilities; inefficiency and wastage in the system through grade repetition; lack of an electricity supply; the lack of telephones and internet connectivity; and improved teacher qualifications that do not necessarily translate into improved learner performance. The inefficiency and wastage were further manifested through many

NSSCO, NSSCH, and NSSCAS candidates being awarded poor performance symbols, particularly symbol D.

Also evident in the data was the unequal distribution of financial and physical resources and learning opportunities among regions, with the northern regions, particularly Kavango West, Kavango East, Zambezi, Kunene, and Ohangwena being the most under-resourced, and with Kavango West, Kavango East, Kunene and the Zambezi being the regions most poorly served in all respects. We argue that the observed inequalities in the distribution of learning opportunities constitute a barrier to the pro-poor transformation in education that is intended to drive the transition to a high-income knowledge-based economy and equitable social development for all, as envisaged in the transformation agenda. Furthermore, we argue that the inequalities in the distribution of learning opportunities among the regions militate against the transformation agenda that is based on equal opportunities for knowledge creation and implementation, innovation and entrepreneurship, a high economic growth rate, employment creation, and poverty eradication for all. It is possible that the availability of classroom and sanitation facilities for teachers in some schools attracts higher quality teachers. Conversely, the lack of toilets for teachers in some schools acts as disincentive, deterring

better qualified teachers from taking up employment in some schools. The key question to be asked is, which schools (and learners) lack these facilities, and why? One possible explanation could be that the inequalities were inherited from the previous apartheid dispensation. However, this raises the question why, well over three decades into independence and after numerous reform initiatives, these issues have not been addressed, but still persist.

Within the context of the analytical framework of the study, we argue that our observations, perceptions and experiences of limited classroom facilities, the lack of sanitation facilities, and many other barriers identified exist at the level of the *empirical*. As argued by Bhaskar (1978, 2008), this level does not provide us with a deeper understanding of the underlying causal mechanisms responsible for these barriers. We therefore escalated our analysis to the next level of the analytical framework, namely the level of the *actual*.

The ontological level of the actual

Within the context of the analytical framework, the level of the *actual* entails events that take place regardless of our observation of such events. The events happening at the level of the *actual* generate emergent properties

and causal mechanisms that give rise to our perceptions, observations and experiences at the level of the *empirical*. The main event that constituted the focus of the study is Namibia's transformation agenda in education, as represented by major reforms such as ETSIP. We argue that it is reforms such as ETSIP that have causal mechanisms that generate our observations, perceptions and experiences of limited and unequal distribution of classroom facilities, lack of toilet facilities for learners and teachers in some schools, and the preponderance of low grades or symbols (e.g., symbol D) in some regions and schools. We observed from the key documents that the ETSIP programme is no longer prominent in the sector, suggesting the death of the project. Similarly, we could not discern any programme or project popularised in the texts as underpinning the transformation agenda, nor was there any reference to a transformation agenda. Rather, education provision sounded like business as usual. However, our observation is that the ETSIP programme represented a significant strategy for transforming education provision as one that would set Namibia on the path to equitable social and economic development.

We conclude that there appears to be no firm transformation programme, such as the former ETSIP, that is guiding the transformation agenda

in education; alternatively, it appears that there is pervasive contentment, and thus no need for a transformation agenda. In this regard, some documents have referred to the 2015 and 2022 education conferences. However, these conferences did not articulate interpretations or resolutions in a similar manner to ETSIP.

*The ontological level of the **real***

To gain a deeper understanding, we examined the transformation agenda from the perspective of the ontological layer of the *real*. The ontological layer of the *real* afforded the study an opportunity to examine the underlying causal mechanisms responsible for the barriers that persist in the Namibian education system despite the reforms that have been undertaken. We locate the transformation agenda within the broader ideological and philosophical context of the national and global reform agendas in education that receive technical support and donor funding from institutions such as the World Bank, the IMF, the European Union and United Nations institutions such as UNESCO and UNICEF. We argue that the development and implementation of the *Toward Education for All* policy, Vision 2030 and ETSIP, which constitute the transformation agenda in Namibian education, materialised as a result of the technical and financial aid from

donor agencies such as the World Bank and the IMF, and were deeply rooted in the ideological and philosophical orientations of these agencies as a condition for receiving the technical and financial aid. As is common practice, such technical and financial assistance is conceptualised and implemented within the broader neoliberal ideological orientation, popularised globally by these agencies, making its adoption as a precondition for foreign funding and technical support. The neoliberal ideological orientation is located within the ontological layer of the *real*, generating emergent properties and causal mechanisms that shape and inform Namibia's transformation agenda in education. Scholars such as Hill (2003) and Davis and Bansel (2007) have pointed out the emergence of neoliberalism as a global ideological orientation that is shaping and informing the design and implementation of policies in several sectors of society, including education. They argue:

It is sometimes assumed that neoliberalism is peculiar to the northern hemisphere, but the South has been far from immune. The advent of neoliberalism extends to those capitalist countries participating in the global economy and its impacts are more widely geographically dispersed through activities of such groups as the World Bank and the IMF. (Davies & Bansel, 2007, p. 247)

Despite identifying the twin problems of low budgetary allocations and low execution rates, the neoliberal ideology is explicitly advocated in the UNICEF advice in its *Namibia Budget Brief on Education* to explore public-private partnerships (PPSs):

Through well-structured PPSs, Namibia can develop mutually beneficial relationships with the private sector to leverage funding for the delivery of education services, particularly in infrastructure development and improvement ... [and] to explore blended finance arrangements strategically using government revenue and/or Official Development Assistance ... to attract private capital and philanthropic funds ... to crowd-in private investors in the education sector. (UNICEF, 2024, p. 11)

The neoliberal underpinnings of the transformation agenda in education are promoted and advanced by advice such as that of UNICEF for drawing PPSs, Official Development Assistance, and private capital into education, which hinge upon the privatisation, commodification and marketisation of education as “edubusiness”. Yet, as Hill argues:

For neoliberals, profit is God, not the public good. Capitalism is not essentially, kind ... in capitalism it is the insatiable demand for profit that

is the motor for policy, not public or social or common weal, or good ... thus privatised utilities, such as the railway system, health and education services, free and clean water supply are run to maximise the shareholders' profit, rather than to provide a public service. (Hill, 2003, p. 6)

Therefore, to advise for adoption of private capital into education is to consolidate and entrench neoliberal orientations as a major underpinning of the Namibian transformation agenda in education. Besides, privatisation in education has had a tendency to perpetuate a class-based society, with graduates of private schools co-opted into the elite class as they are celebrated as better graduates than those from public schools.

Following on the ontological depth offered by our analytical framework, we argue that for any transformation agenda or educational reform to be effective and sustainable, it must be deeply rooted in the ontological layer of the *real* if it is to address the underlying philosophical or ideological orientation. The ideological orientation, such as neoliberalism, has the function of legitimising, or normalising, the current arrangements as natural and the only realistic alternative. The philosophical orientation has a tendency to hegemonise the current

arrangements so that they are accepted and perpetuated as the best option, with those in power maintaining dominance over the powerless members of society. We argue that this legitimising and hegemonising function of ideology is one of the reasons why the challenges have tended to outsmart our transformation agenda.

Conclusion

The study investigated the barriers that impede the successful implementation of Namibia's transformation agenda in education, the underlying causal mechanisms responsible for these barriers, and a possible way forward to ensure successful implementation of the transformation agenda. The study identified several observable barriers located in the domain of the ontological layer of the *empirical*, with the neoliberal ideological orientation as the underpinning causal force responsible for these barriers, and located at the ontological layer of the *real*. The study observed that the transformation agenda lacked ontological depth and restricted its activities within the surface-level domain of the *empirical*. The surface level transformation resulted in certain challenges persisting in Namibian education, and outsmarting several reform initiatives. The study recommends a transformation process that adopts a depth perspective to transform not only the observable surface-level challenges, but also the

deeper-level factors that give rise to these surface-level factors. By recommending a depth perspective, the study revisits the question that was posed in the introduction, namely: What kind of education, for whom, and for what purpose? While other educational epochs (e.g., traditional education, missionary education, and colonial education) had clear philosophies in terms of the kinds of education that was offered, and for whom it was offered, the current education system appear to lack a clearly articulated philosophical base. This has made the current education system vulnerable to global ideologies such as neoliberalism. A transformation agenda which transforms the current neoliberal agenda and sets a different philosophical orientation at the deeper level of the *real* is therefore recommended.

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Social Justice and Education in Namibia: From Theory to Practice

Lucy Edwards-Jauch

Abstract:

This article applies a social justice lens to analyse Namibia's educational evolution from colonialism until the present. It identifies the key historical and structural factors that continue to confront postcolonial educational reform. The article traces the historical, structural and ideational factors that influenced Namibian educational philosophical and policy discourse. Through empirical data obtained from secondary sources and official statistics, it seeks to assess if the conditions for social justice education

have been attained, and whether the basic social justice principles of access, equity, inclusion, participation, and human rights are observed, theoretically and practically. The article also points to the factors that still hamper the implementation of equitable, quality "education for all", as set out in various global and Namibian policy instruments.

Keywords: education, social justice, distributive justice, relational justice, epistemological justice



Structural inequality undermines the attainment of quality education for all.

Source: Dirk Haarmann

Introduction

Education has been a crucial site of political contestation during Namibia's liberation struggle. Progressive student movements mobilised around the Freirean concept of "education for liberation". With the achievement of national liberation, educational policy discourse embraced aspects of social justice encapsulated in the emancipatory politics of the liberation struggle. The underlying social justice principles of access, equity, diversity, participation and human rights permeate post-independence educational policy discourse, giving rise to policies that represent a domestication of numerous international educational philosophies and policy instruments that were adapted to Namibian circumstances. Post-independence educational reform occurred while the historical colonial legacies and socioeconomic conditions persisted, making it challenging to translate the emancipatory ideals of the liberation struggle into practice.

The transformation of education in Namibia required an reversal of past injustices and an affirmation of the rights and entitlements previously denied to disenfranchised groups. Educational policy reforms had to be aligned to a new rights-based constitutional order that centres justice, human rights and democracy. A social justice lens is therefore needed to reflect on how far Namibia has

come in its quest to provide equitable, quality "education for all". Social justice implies three interrelated conditions to be present in the educational system, namely distributional justice, relational justice, and epistemological justice. To achieve these three conditions the educational system should comply with the five basic social justice principles of access, equity, diversity, participation and human rights.

At Independence, Namibia inherited 11 racially fragmented educational departments and in which access and resources were based on racially established hierarchies. This occurred by design, as the racially fragmented educational system served the racialised labour hierarchy of racial capitalism that was introduced by the German colonial regime and further entrenched by the South African one.

This article traces the historical, structural and ideational factors that influenced Namibian educational philosophical and policy discourse. Through empirical data obtained from secondary sources, research reports and official statistics, the article seeks to identify the achievements and shortcomings in the process of translating basic social justice conditions and principles into practice. Upon review of the data, it became clear that the translation of theoretical and policy commitments into social justice

is complicated by historical legacies of racial oppression and the structural legacies of colonialism.

Namibia has made great strides in the provision of comprehensive, inclusive basic education. This is affirmed by the near universal access to primary education and a phenomenal increase in access to tertiary education. Its educational expenditure, both as a percentage of revenue and of gross domestic product surpasses global benchmarks. However, systemic and structural inequalities impact on education in fundamental ways, and the country therefore finds it difficult to achieve the key conditions of social justice, namely, distributional justice, relational justice, and epistemic justice.

Conceptual Framework

Social justice education

There is no unified social justice theory on education; instead, social justice theory eclectically draws on different theoretical influences, most notably Dewey's participatory, learner-centred experiential learning, Marxist correspondence principle and social reproduction theory, and Freire's critical pedagogy. It also draws on established international human rights norms and principles. At the very minimum, it commits to some key principles of social justice (Kent State University, 2020), namely:

- **access** to resources;
- **equity**, by addressing the systemic barriers to access and quality educational outcomes;
- **diversity**, by embracing differences and facilitating access to people from different cultural, linguistic, or socioeconomic groups, as well as people living with disabilities and those who experience different forms of discrimination;
- **participation**, by creating platforms and opportunities for students, parents and diverse communities to participate in educational policy making, and to ensure that their experiences are represented and reflected in educational content; and
- **human rights**, by advancing and protecting the rights of all those who participate in the educational process.

Liberal theorists' interpretations of social justice limit it to the legal right to equality of opportunity, irrespective of how structural inequalities undermine the substantive realisation of such a right. More radical interpretations of social justice seek to transform the structural inequalities that result in unequal access to quality education and unequal educational outcomes. To address these structural barriers, three interrelated aspects of social

justice need to be present. These are distributional justice, relational justice, and epistemic justice (Nesterova, 2023).

Distributive justice raises the question of how educational resources are distributed amongst various socioeconomic groups in society. In education, the choice is between equality (i.e., all getting the same amount) or equity (i.e., when inequalities and the need for a fairer distribution are recognised so that poorer groups get more to bridge the inequality gap) (Maiese, 2023).

Relational justice focuses on equity in the human relations between pedagogic actors. It refers to fair terms of cooperation between students and teachers that maintain dignity and affirms democracy and the self-esteem of all (Nesterova, 2023).

Epistemic justice refers to the issue of whose knowledge is privileged, as knowledge and power are co-implicated. What stands as knowledge reflects who holds power. Under colonialism, knowledge was generated to justify colonial subjugation and affirm racist narratives about European superiority. The colonised were constructed as sub-human, devoid of knowledge and culture. Alongside genocide, epistemicide and systematic erasure of indigenous knowledge occurred. Epistemic justice recognises

that knowledge construction is not neutral, and that it is linked to various hierarchies of power. This has led to attempts to decolonise knowledge and to affirm the knowledge of diverse indigenous groups, including the knowledge and experiences of oppressed, marginalised and excluded groups. For epistemic justice to be realised, this diversity should be represented in curriculum content (Mungwini, 2018; Nesterova, 2023).

Methodology

The purpose of this research was to ascertain the extent to which education in Namibia meets the key conditions and principles of social justice. It reflects on the contextual factors, ideational resources and global educational policy discourses Namibia has drawn on in its own educational policy discourse and practice. The research methodology used was qualitative documentary analysis. This is an analysis of various documents pertaining to the topic under examination. These included international literature on educational philosophy, like the works of John Dewey and Paulo Freire; international educational policy instruments to which Namibia acceded; the Namibian constitution, laws, educational policies, and development policies; academic reports; journal articles, and newspaper articles. It involves the collection, examination and interpretation of

documents in order to understand meaning (Bowden, 2009). Secondary sources were the main sources of data collected, most notably official statistics, official reports, research reports, journal articles, books, and newspaper articles. The unit of analysis of the study was the Namibian educational system. Theoretical sampling was used to identify the elements relevant to education and social justice. Sampling was therefore theoretically driven (Neuman, 2011).

Contextual Factors that Influence Social Justice in Education

Colonial legacies

Christian missionary education was the genesis of formalised basic education in Namibia. Literacy was taught to facilitate the conversion to Christianity through Bible reading, while practical training in gardening and building skills supported the mission station's self-sufficiency. Missionaries were the first to introduce racially segregated and unequal education for whites, blacks and coloureds in Otjimbingwe and Rehoboth. Under German occupation, compulsory education was only introduced for children from white settler households (United Nations Institute for Namibia [UNIN], 1986; Katjavivi, 1988).

After South West Africa (as Namibia was then known) was placed under a

South African mandate in 1920, the initial concern was with education for whites, and white education was placed under the control of the South African Department of Education, while missionaries maintained control over African education. In 1923, missionaries pledged loyalty to South African policies. This was followed by the 1926 Education Proclamation that set an upper limit (Standard VI) for missionary education (Cohen, 1994). The first state-funded African school opened in Aminuis, south-east of Windhoek, in 1935; between 1920 and 1960, no state-funded schools were built in the northern parts of Namibia (Katjavivi, 1988).

Racial segregation and inequality were legally and systemically intensified after 1948 when South African apartheid educational policies were extended to Namibia. A series of commissions of enquiry reports (the Eiselen Commission (1951); the Van Zyl Commission (1958), and the Odendaal Commission (1962–63) provided the models for legislative changes entrenching apartheid education, starting with the Bantu Education Act of 1953, followed by the Education Ordinance 27 of 1962, and later the Representative Authorities Proclamation 8 of 1980 passed by the Administrator General (widely referred to as AG 8). These legislative changes brought all education (including missionary education) under state

control. There was also further fragmentation of education into a mixture of racially and ethnically stratified educational departments, in line with the apartheid state's Bantustan policies (Katjavivi, 1988; UNIN 1986; Cohen, 1994). At Independence, Namibian basic education was fragmented in 11 racially, ethnically and geographically segregated "representative" authorities for Rehoboth Basters; Bushmen; Caprivians; Coloureds; Damaras; Hereros; Kavangos; Namas; Ovambos; Tswanas and Whites (Cohen, 1994; Government of the Republic of Namibia [GRN], 1981).

Inequality and poverty

Against the background of the historical fragmentation, unequal access and racial segregation of education in Namibia, attaining justice in education is still severely constrained by broader structural economic factors. The most important of these are the inequality and poverty that have their roots in the colonial economy. They persist because Namibia has not decolonised its economy.

There is a circular relationship between poverty, inequality and educational outcomes. Poverty and inequality result in unequal access to education, and this reproduces inequalities and poor learning outcomes in education. The cycle starts

at birth. Ferguson et al. (2007) found that children born into poverty often lack the school readiness that would enable them to succeed academically and socially, as they suffer from cognitive disadvantages. In Namibia, Muine and Lemven (2023) show that the cycle of poverty, inequality and poor education are mutually reinforcing, and that outcomes go beyond mere access to educational opportunities. There is also a strong direct correlation between family wealth, access to higher education, and social mobility, with students from wealthier backgrounds having better chances of accessing quality higher education, completing their studies, and achieving upward social movement (Braga et al., 2017).

Namibia is the second-most unequal country in the world, with a Gini coefficient of 59.1. Although urban inequality has narrowed, rural poverty has increased. The national level of income poverty stands at 27.9 %, and multidimensional poverty at 43%. Multidimensional poverty in Kavango West stands at 79.6%, Kavango East at 70.0%, and Kunene at 64.1%, all much higher than the national average. Amongst Khoisan language speakers, multidimensional poverty stands at 93% (World Bank, 2025; United Nations Population Fund, 2021). The high levels of poverty combined with climate shocks and high food prices increase malnutrition and stunting,

which have negative effects on cognitive development. In Namibia, 29.5% of children under five are stunted (GRN, 2025a; Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, 2025).

Violence

Violence obstructs equal access to education and is often a function of discrimination and inequalities. Sociologist John Galtung (1969) identifies three intersecting forms of violence, namely structural violence, cultural violence, and direct violence. All of these are present in Namibia and impact on access, equity, human rights, diversity, and participation. Structural violence is the preventable harm caused when the social, economic and political structures in society prevent the realisation of full potential. Structural violence is a hallmark of unequal societies that distribute wealth and privilege to some, while excluding others on the basis of social class, skin colour, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or nationality, or other forms of discrimination that prevent some learners from reaching their potential. Structural violence normally precedes other forms of violence (Galtung, 1969, 1971).

Cultural violence refers to ideational resources used to justify and legitimise inequalities and exclusion, be it in the fields of religion, culture or language,

or in the media. It is also the elevation of some forms of knowledge and the devaluing of others (Galtung, 1990; Hathway, 2013).

Direct violence is the violence most commonly recognised as violence and most commonly referred to in discussions on violence in schools. It refers to physical and psychological violence perpetrated by identifiable individuals or groups (Galtung, 1969), and includes verbal abuse, physical assault, sexual assault, corporal punishment and other forms of abuse experienced in schools.

Underfunding

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has warned that chronic underfunding of education is a barrier against quality, inclusive and equitable education. Globally, there is an annual education funding gap of U\$97 billion. There are substantial inequalities in education expenditure between high-income and low-income countries. In the former, average per capita expenditure on education is US\$8,532, while in the latter, per capita expenditure is US\$55. Low-income countries are also fiscally constrained by high debt repayments of about 70% of gross domestic product (GDP). Underfunding in education entails huge opportunity costs due to high

drop-out and repetition rates, and skills deficits. Many low-income and lower middle-income countries are stuck in a debt trap where external debt grows faster than growth in GDP. They also spend more than 10% of annual budgets on mere debt servicing. This can mean that resources are diverted from education to debt servicing. The United Nations (UN) has proposed debt-for-education swaps, where creditors convert debt into investment in education (UNESCO Global Education Cooperation Mechanism, 2025).

In Namibia's 2024/25 budget, per capita expenditure on education is far below that of high-income countries, but four times the average for African countries, and the fourth-highest in Africa (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund [UNICEF], 2024). In 2025, Namibia's educational expenditure was 23.4% of the national budget, and 8.9% of GDP. Both surpass global Sustainable Development Goal benchmarks of 20% of the national budget and 6% of GDP (Steenkamp, 2025a), while debt servicing accounted for N\$14.3 billion or 16.1% of revenue in the 2025–26 financial year ("Govt allocates N\$663 million", 2025). The allocation to education, though huge in Namibian terms, is still not sufficient to cover the spending gaps in the educational system, particularly for classroom shortages, dilapidated

infrastructure, educational materials, additional teaching staff, and disability-adjusted materials and infrastructure.

The Key Ideational Influences on Namibian Educational Policy Discourse and Practices

To understand how the post-independence educational policy discourse implicitly or explicitly draws on different theoretical frameworks and global educational instruments, one must briefly outline the most important theoretical traditions and policy instruments.

Marxism

Marxists like Bowles et al. (n.d.) argue that the education system essentially reproduces and legitimises inequalities in society. Their "correspondence principle" seeks to illuminate the direct relationship between education and economy. With reference to American society, they argue that the primary role of education in the economy is to reproduce an amenable and docile labour force within capitalist social relations of production. Schooling serves this overarching objective through its systems of social class reproduction and hierarchical streaming that reproduces a hierarchical division of labour. Schooling not only prepares individuals with the technical and cognitive skills to bend to the demands

of this economy, but also creates the ideational environment and systems of sanctions and rewards for conforming to this overarching objective. Schooling therefore serves the hierarchical division of labour that produces inequalities and stratifies society. This reproduction takes place when wealthier students with privileged access to quality education attain the knowledge and skills required for occupying the higher echelons of the labour hierarchy, with high concomitant income and status, and poor and working-class students with limited access to education occupy lower positions in the labour hierarchy.

Pragmatism and educational progressivism

Dewey's process-driven educational philosophy is often referred to as progressivism, or experiential learning. Dewey's educational philosophy emerged as a response to widely used rote learning and memorisation of curriculum content. He understood education as a participatory, learner-centred, experiential, democratic pedagogic process. He saw the societal role of education as essential to the creation of a democratic citizenry, and for social harmony and social progress. He argued that pedagogic methods and subject matter are interlinked rather than distinct, and saw experiential learning as a cycle of active learning engagement followed up by passive reflection.

Critical theory

Critical pedagogy emerged out of a critique of oppressive societal conditions. Its primary concern is the development of critical consciousness in order to transform unjust exploitative and oppressive social, political and economic systems. Paulo Freire is undoubtedly the most influential critical pedagogy theorist. He viewed education as a democratic, reflexive process of dialogue to develop critical consciousness in oppressed groups so that they can act to overcome oppression (Nouri & Sajjadi, 2014). He wrote under conditions of extreme repression and military dictatorship in Brazil, and his primary focus was therefore a pedagogy that could liberate the oppressed. He based it on his own concrete experience with peasant education projects (Freire, 1970/2005; Takona, 2025).

Freire's emancipatory ideals are encapsulated the notion of education for liberation. It derives from his conviction that pedagogy is a democratic process of dialogue that should entail critical consciousness towards action. The emancipatory ideals should be informed by a democratic, humanistic, empowering and reflexive pedagogy in order to overcome dehumanisation. He referred to his pedagogy of the oppressed as a humanistic and libertarian development of the critical consciousness to confront oppression. Critical consciousness, to him, implied

a dialectical relationship between action and reflection, which he referred to as praxis (Freire, 1970/2005). He opposed the conventional banking system of education in which teachers are authoritative knowers, and students passive objects that need to be filled with deposits of information. Instead, he advocated a problem-posing process of dialogue in which knowledge construction is a co-creation of learners and educators (Giroux, 2025).

Utilitarianism

The English philosopher Herbert Spencer first applied utilitarian theory to education. He argued that education should primarily be geared towards direct and indirect self-preservation, and that the most important function of preservation is to secure livelihoods for the individual and the family. And secondly, that education should teach the discipline needed for the preservation of the family and society. As such, education should be rational, practical and vocational (Spencer, 1861).

From the 1980s, preserved through dominant global institutions, neoliberalism became the dominant economic ideology. In support of neoliberalism, utilitarianism resurged strongly in educational policy discourse and curricula. Education consequently became driven by the needs of the economy and

the markets, and pedagogic subjects became economic units of production and consumption. With the neoliberal philosophy of the minimalist state, austerity budgets prevailed, with cuts in education, health and social welfare spending. This led to education not being purely a public good, as there was the widespread privatisation of educational provision. Knowledge was linked with and often limited to what was marketable (Panitsides, 2015; Giroux, 2014; Edeji, 2024).

At the level of education policy making and curriculum development, discourses of human capital formation and a knowledge-based economy were popularised. Educational expenditure was seen as an investment that should yield returns through increased productivity (World Bank, 2018). STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) were privileged over the liberal arts in education budgetary allocations, and there was an increased vocationalisation of higher education (Giroux, 2014). To exact greater efficiencies, curricula became increasingly globalised and standardised, with higher levels of accountability. This placed more onerous administrative burdens on teachers, as outcomes-based education and competency-based educational curricula specified universalistic educational outcomes, irrespective of historical, social and cultural contexts (Edeji, 2024).

Supporters of the human capital approach argue that it is crucial to economic growth, labour productivity and job creation, and that investment in education and training will lead to higher earnings that benefit both individuals and society (Becker, 1993; World Bank, 2024). Critics argued that it is oversimplistic and does not account for historical and structural differences and the social reproduction of status (Marginson, 2017). Others argued that it undermines equity and equality, as underfunding in public education, the commodification of education, and the proliferation of private education create inequalities in the quality of education provided to different groups in society (Melanson, 2023). Furthermore, they argued that it overloads teachers with constant assessments and reporting that divert time from actual teaching, leading to teacher dissatisfaction and attrition (Berlach, 2004; Melanson, 2023; Edeji, 2024).

The human capital approach to education has opened up wider access to higher education. This massification often serves to entrench inequalities, as public funding does not support this expansion, leading to vast differences in funding and educational outcomes between elite universities and others (Nyagope, 2024; Tepel et al., 2025), which could explain high graduate unemployment levels.

International Policy Instruments that Influenced Namibian Educational Policy Discourse

At a global level, there have been various attempts to apply different and often contradictory conceptual frameworks to educational policy making. At times, this involved the mere appropriation of the language of social justice without meaningfully transforming the social system that produces the structural barriers impeding the attainment of social justice. Therefore, despite progress in educational access and equity, gross global, regional and local inequalities remain firmly entrenched, and globally, 272 million children and adolescents are out of school, 75% of whom are in Africa (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2025). Educational rights are contained in many educational declarations (at least at a discursive level) and most capture the language of social justice. In the earlier declarations, one sees the lineages of Dewey's progressive educational philosophy and Freire's critical pedagogy. In the later declarations like the Sustainable Development Goals, the language of social justice is employed to pursue utilitarianism.

UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

The *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* (United Nations, 1989) is legally binding and was ratified by Namibia in 1990. It directs all states parties that are signatories to the Convention to implement legislation and administrative procedures that recognise the right to education (United Nations, 1989).

World Declaration on Education for All: Meeting Basic Learning Needs

The theme of “education for all” reverberates through this declaration, adopted in Jomtien, Thailand, in 1990 (UNESCO, 1990). It affirms the right of every person (children and adults) to basic education that includes both essential learning tools such as literacy, oral expression, numeracy, and problem-solving skills, and learning content such as the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes necessary for surviving, living and working in dignity. The declaration further calls for universalising equitable access to education, particularly for “poor; street and working children; rural and remote populations; nomads and migrant workers; indigenous peoples; ethnic, racial, and linguistic minorities; refugees; those displaced by war; and people under occupation”, as well as for people living with disabilities (UNESCO, 1990).

Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education

International educational policy makers converged at Salamanca in Spain where they adopted the *Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education* in 1994. This was done to celebrate diversity and to make education for all more effective. One of the basic principles adopted was that schools should be able to accommodate all children, regardless of physical, mental, intellectual, social, emotional or linguistic conditions, and to normalise difference. Another was that inclusive schools should provide extra support to accommodate children of different abilities with special needs (UNESCO, 1994).

Dakar Framework for Action

The *Dakar Framework for Action* was adopted by the World Education Forum in 2000 to reaffirm commitments and assess progress towards education for all. Given the huge gaps and lags identified at the preceding regional conference, governments were urged to increase resource allocations to education (UNESCO, 2000).

Incheon Declaration

The Incheon Declaration, which was adopted by the World Education Forum in 2015 at Incheon, Republic of Korea,

embraces many social justice principles in its policy agenda. The declaration expands upon the education for all agenda adopted by the Jomtien declaration (*World Declaration on Education for All*) and reaffirmed by the *Dakar Framework*. It calls for equitable and quality education that comprises at least one year's compulsory access to preschool; access to 12 years of free primary and secondary education, of which at least 9 years are compulsory; the elimination of all forms of exclusion, inequality, marginalisation and disparities in accessing quality educational opportunities to promote inclusion; gender equality in access to education; well trained, empowered, professionally qualified and motivated teachers who operate in well resourced, efficient, effective and well governed educational systems; the achievement of functional literacy, numeracy, problem solving, and analytical and interpersonal skills in adult education; and the recognition and accreditation of prior learning and lifelong learning pathways (World Bank, 2015).

UN Sustainable Development Goal 4: Quality Education

The UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), also known as Agenda 2030, comprise 17 goals to be attained by 2030 for sustainable development. While the causes of underdevelopment are not illuminated, SDG 4 aspires

towards the achievement of inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities, setting targets to realise this aspiration by 2030 (UNESCO, n.d.). These targets are very similar to those set in the Incheon Declaration. The very concept of sustainable development has been critiqued for its contradictory logic. On the one hand it calls for sustainable development, and on the other it calls for economic growth and expansion that will most likely exacerbate climate collapse (Swain, 2017).

Namibian educational policies in support of social justice

Namibia has committed itself to social justice in education through the domestication of a number of international instruments. Vision 2030, which is the fundamental guide for Namibia's postcolonial development, identified the following vision for education by 2030: unified and adequate education infrastructure in all regions; access to lifelong learning; senior secondary education for at least 80% of learners; access to tertiary education for at least 75% of school leavers; a large but unspecified number of multipurpose learning centres with internet access; well qualified teaching staff at all levels; a curriculum focus on science and technology; basic education that focuses on literacy and numeracy; and properly functioning research,

development and early education components (GRN, 2004). Vision 2030 shows a combination of commitments to social justice through equal access and utilitarian objective through skills formation that serves the economy.

Namibia's *Sixth National Development Plan* (NDP6) contains a similar commitment to social justice and utilitarian skills formation for economic development (GRN, 2025b). It advocates for equitable access to early childhood development, primary education, secondary education, vocational training, higher education and life-long learning. NDP6 also repeats policy commitments to equitable resource distribution at all levels of education to ensure that the goal of accessible, equitable, inclusive quality education is indeed realised in line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (GRN, 2025b).

The policy commitment to social justice is further advanced in its call for education for all (GRN, 2002). The commitment to provide equitable, inclusive, quality education for all is reinforced by a number of policy documents, particularly the *National Policy on Disability*, the *National Policy Options for Educationally Marginalised Children*, the *Education Sector Policy for the Prevention and Management of Learner Pregnancy*, and the *Sector Policy on Inclusive Education* (GRN, 2008,

2013). Learner-centred education was introduced to promote access, equity, quality and democracy in education (Potokri & Mwelitondola, 2022). The *Sector Policy on Inclusive Education* calls for the end of segregation and exclusion on the basis of academic performance, gender, race, culture, religion, lifestyle, health conditions or disability. The policy points to discrimination, remote geographical locations, and discriminatory policies as being barriers to inclusive education. It further identifies groups of learners whose access to equitable, inclusive and quality education is at risk, including children of farmworkers; children in remote areas; children from informal settlements; children of refugees; children living in extreme poverty; child labourers; children who head households; over-aged children; children with learning difficulties; learner-parents; children with disabilities; and orphans and vulnerable children (GRN, 2013). The Basic Education Act (3 of 2020) sets out to promote free, equitable, inclusive and quality education and lifelong learning for all. It also requires the government to ensure the mobilisation of resources to effectively implement the national policy on inclusive education (*Basic Education Act 3 of 2020*, 2020).

The overall education policy discourse implicitly carries the lineages of various theoretical paradigms. One can discern the central themes from

Dewey's progressivism, in which education is viewed as a means to promote democracy and critical thinking skills. Namibia's policy commitments to learner-centredness also resonate with his view of participatory, experiential learning. The policy on inclusive education recognises the structural elements of inequality central to Freire's critical pedagogy. The commitment to education that supports Namibia's economic growth and development objectives speaks to elements of utilitarianism. Repeated references to overcoming inequalities, discrimination and exclusion also speak to the Marxist view of education as not just serving the labour market needs of capital. Namibia's eclectic embrace of disparate theories speaks to the socioeconomic realities confronting the country as it tries to combine utility with democracy, inclusion, human rights, diversity, and social justice.

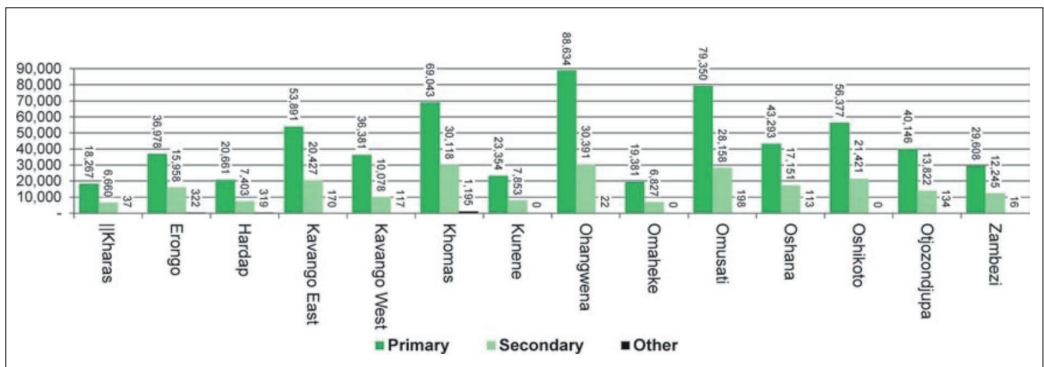
Translation of Policy Discourse into Practice

Access

Namibia has made great progress in widening access to education. With the introduction of universal primary education in 2013 and universal secondary education in 2016, Namibia instituted free basic education for all. In 2023, there were 846,519 learners and 33,622 teachers. Between 2017 and 2023, the number of schools increased from 1,848 to 2,004 (GRN, 2024b). Namibia is on the verge of achieving universal education access at primary school level, with a 2025 enrolment rate of 97.8% (Hembapu, 2025).

Despite compulsory education provisions, there is a sharp decrease in school enrolment figures after the age of 15 years, despite the constitution (in article 20) requiring that children

Figure 1 *Increase in enrolment by region*



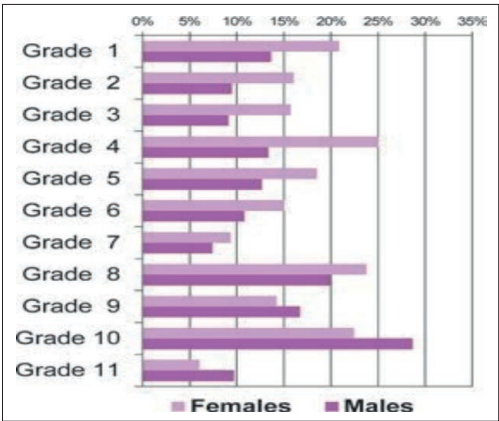
Source: GRN (2024b, p. 10)

should remain in school until 16 years of age (GRN, 2016). Only 24.8% of Namibians have completed secondary education, and 11,8 % have completed tertiary education (GRN 2024a). High enrolment rates are countered by low school survival rates (UNICEF, 2024). There is a sharp decrease in enrolment from grade 10 to grade 11, as grade 10 is an exit point and many do not quality to proceed to the Advanced Subsidiary level (GRN, 2024b).

Ipinge and Serote (2024) found that school dropouts are linked to high levels of poverty, as parents and guardians cannot afford school uniforms, textbooks and stationery.

The growth in enrolment has increased the need for increased infrastructure expenditure, for example on classrooms, hostels, libraries, materials and equipment, but budg-

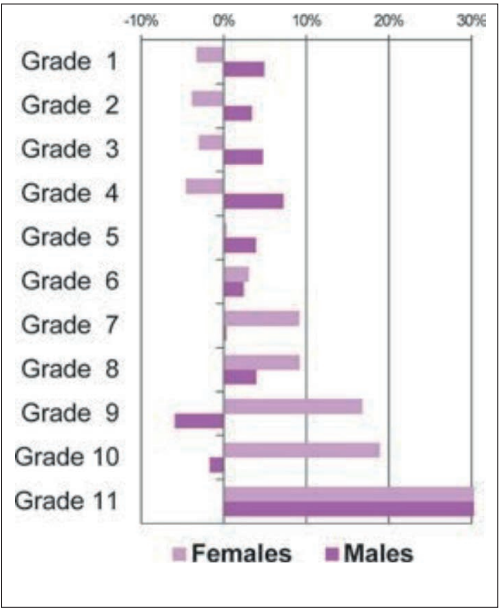
Figure 2 School enrolment



Source: GRN (2024b, p. 41)

etary allocations have not increased accordingly.

Figure 3 Dropout rates



Promotion rates are higher for girls than for boys, and girls' repetition rates up to grade 9 are lower. Thereafter, a higher percentage of boys than girls leave schools. In the Kavango West and Kunene regions, dropouts for girls are typically caused by high levels of pregnancy, poverty, hunger, and weak parental involvement. The inability of poor families to afford basic necessities and school supplies forces children to leave school in order to take on caregiving and income generating roles (Ndalikokule, 2025; Kangumine, 2025). Despite investments in education, overcrowding and the need to hold

afternoon classes persist (GRN, 2024b). The Minister of Education has conceded that there is a shortage of classrooms (Hivelu, 2025).

Tertiary education expansion has driven greater access to higher education. Between 2019 and 2023, the number students enrolled at tertiary education institutions increased from 13,000 to 80,226. Women constituted almost two-thirds of enrolled students (for every 100 male students, there were 182 female students) (National Council for Higher Education, 2023). Since 2026, the government has introduced subsidised (tuition fee-free) higher education. Priority will be given to skills-based education in line with needs of a knowledge-based

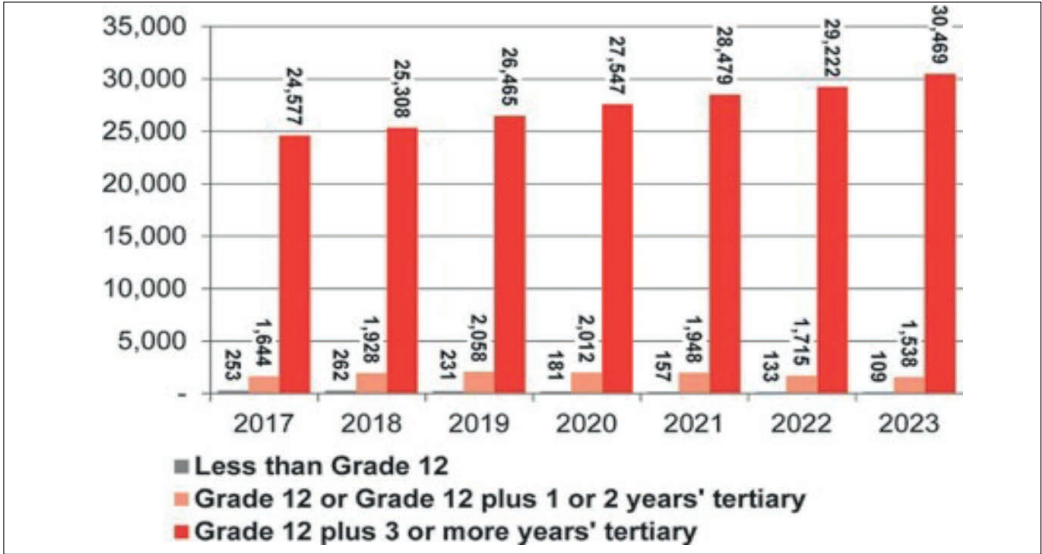
economy and the needs of key sectors of the economy (Albertz, 2025).

Expansion in access to tertiary education has had an impact on teacher qualifications, as shown in Figure 4 below.

Equity

Regions with high levels of multi-dimensional poverty, in particular Kavango East and Kavango West, get less educational financial support than those with lower levels of poverty. Regions with greater classroom gaps, like Ohangwena, Omusati, Kavango East and Kavango West, do not get larger shares of the education development budget to help overcome the colonial

Figure 4 Teacher qualifications



Source: GRN (2024b, p. 62)

legacies of infrastructural deficits in these regions. The budget's indifference to the state of household and regional inequalities reinforces and deepens inequalities. This is reflected in per capita expenditure, where resources allocated to children from wealthy households are equal to expenditure on children from poor and extremely poor households. This privileges equality over equity. The education ministry has introduced a school grant policy to address inequalities in resource distributions. The grant policy was hailed as a pro-poor strategy to facilitate equitable allocation. Disbursement would take into account certain equity criteria, like special learning needs and remoteness of the school location (Nashuuta, 2025).

The law directs the Namibian government to ensure that the policy on inclusive education is applied at all schools, and thus to ensure that the necessary tools, facilities and resources are available to implement the policy. As such, there should be a separate budget vote to fund education for learners with disabilities (*Basic Education Act 3 of 2020*, 2020). Despite this, there is still significant underfunding, as the available schools and facilities do not match the needs. Poor budget execution rates, particularly on the development budget, also curtails educational infrastructure expansion. In many schools, there is a lack of both

hardware and software information and communication technologies. Between 2019 and 2023, the number of computer laboratories at schools decreased from 601 to 485 (UNICEF, 2024).

Inequalities in the distribution of educational resources, learning materials, educational facilities and well trained teachers produce unequal educational outcomes, and therefore unequal life prospects. In their study in informal settlements in Namibia, Ipinge and Seroto (2024) found that the lack of teaching and learning aids, textbooks and stationery, together with overcrowding and the lack or dilapidated state of educational infrastructure, produced poor educational outcomes. They also found poor educational outcomes where there are high levels of poverty. Namibian children from poor families find it difficult to pursue higher education, for besides tuition fees, books, supplies and transportation costs must be covered.

Differential access to quality education also has a geographic dimension, as poor children in rural areas are also more likely to experience unequal access to quality education (Muine & Lemven, 2023). Poor sanitation has led to the suspension of classes in Rundu (Muyamba, 2025). Regions with poor infrastructure and adverse weather events emanating

from climate change have also seen disruptions in education, as has occurred in the Kunene, Omusati, Oshana, Ohangwena and Zambezi regions (Ndeyanale et al., 2025).

Learning poverty is still commonplace. A national assessment showed that there were pockets of excellence, but overall, only 32% of learners achieved the minimum 40% pass rate in numeracy, and only 5% scored over 75%. Furthermore, 82% did not achieve the expected competence in counting, and 62% struggled to compare numbers. In literacy, only 28% of learners met the pass rate of 40%, and only 3% scored 75% or higher. Only 20% of learners could demonstrate higher-order skills in reading. Among visually impaired learners, less than 10% reached the required levels of literacy and numeracy. Learners in rural areas experienced greater learning disadvantages and lower access to structured learning interventions (Steenkamp, 2025b).

Participation and human rights

Educational governance makes provision for democratically elected school boards to promote parental involvement and co-governance at schools. The law gives them wide-ranging powers with regard to rules, recruitment, administration and

oversight over school infrastructure. All groups represented in the school community also have representation on the school boards, and they include teachers, learners, parents, non-teaching staff, and others with expertise. To give effect to learner participation in school governance, schools must create spaces, platforms and an environment that allow for meaningful participation. The law also requires schools to capacitate learners for such meaningful participation through the core curriculum, and extracurricular activities that impart the democratic values of accountability, transparency, participation and leadership (*Basic Education Act 3 of 2020*, 2020).

Serious attempts have been made by the government to introduce relational justice in schools. The *Basic Education Act* and various policies support basic human rights and participation. There are very specific prohibitions on discrimination, as well as prohibitions on physical and mental violence against learners (*Basic Education Act 3 of 2020*, 2020). Despite these prohibitions, the Namibia National Safe Schools Framework report acknowledges that violence in schools is an impediment to the provision of quality education. The report identifies groups that are vulnerable to violence in schools. They include children with disabilities and children from marginalised backgrounds. The statistics cited show

very high levels of violence in schools, with 45.4 % of girls and 47.9% of boys aged 13–15 years experiencing bullying, and 19% of learners reporting being forced to have sex at school, 22% being verbally abused, 17% being threatened with harm, 72% receiving corporal punishment, and 30% experiencing sexual harassment. The report sees schools as microcosms of broader society that reflect more widespread power relationships, discriminatory practices and violence (GRN, 2018).

Diversity

Articles 10 and 20 of the Namibian Constitution support education for all. Gender mainstreaming policies and policies on disability foreground Namibia's commitment to inclusive education, and "education for all", irrespective of race, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, religion, sex or creed. Neither the constitution nor the policies make any mention of sexual orientation and diverse gender identities. Article 18 of the Constitution protects cultural diversity, while Article 21 protects freedom of conscience and academic freedom (GRN, 2016). Despite progressive legal and policy provisions, broader societal inequalities and discrimination persist. Reports of tribalism in the recruitment of teachers at schools have received a strong rebuke from authorities (De Klerk & Bento, 2025).

The *Basic Education Act* gives preference to mother tongue instruction at schools, based on the principle that, where reasonable and practical, every learner has the right to instruction in the language of their choice. This is further based on the premise that education should foster a culture of democracy and diversity, and promote languages that have been discriminated against in the past. The Act also makes provision for the use of sign language in schools. Despite attempts to promote indigenous languages and save them from extinction, few teachers are willing to pursue qualifications in indigenous language teaching. Parents also mainly prefer English as the medium of instruction, to align with the language skills values and demands of labour markets ("Indigenous languages," 2025).

Policy documents do not address the need for epistemological justice through the incorporation of localised indigenous knowledge into formal curricula in order to validate all knowledge forms, and are silent on the need to move away from the notion that only Western knowledge is valid. Apart from a few isolated initiatives, for example, to integrate indigenous knowledge into ethnomathematics (Shimwandi et al., 2024), there is no evidence of the widespread application of indigenous knowledge in Namibian educational curricula.

Conclusions

Namibia's relatively high levels of expenditure on education confirms a commitment to the central role of education in the country's development agenda. Educational expenditure as a percentage of revenue and of GDP exceed global benchmarks. Nevertheless, there is significant underfunding relative to the amounts needed to ensure quality education for all, as outlined in Namibia's SDG 4 commitments.

Namibia's educational policy discourse draws on diverse and at times contradictory theoretical and philosophical discourses. It eclectically combines multiple policy objectives of equity and efficiency. Namibia also has many programmes that promote the objective of social justice, like school feeding schemes, humanitarian support to marginalised groups, and learning support programmes for disadvantaged learners. The *Basic Education Act* and policies relating to inclusive education promote broader access to education for all. Although access has increased across educational levels, there are still low completion and attainment rates. These may be linked to broader social justice concerns beyond the educational system itself. Broader structural level inequalities, for example high levels of stunting, malnourishment and poverty, impact on

teaching and learning, and affect cognitive development. Without broader structural transformation, it may be more difficult for the educational system to ameliorate and compensate for structural-level inequalities.

There are three conditions for social justice that education in Namibia fails to meet. Firstly, there is a lack of distributional justice. Educational budgets and resource allocations privilege equality over equity, and consequently, regions that colonial, apartheid and Bantustan policies neglected the most are still disadvantaged, because budgetary allocations lack the fairness to overcome these deficits. In addition, the most important foundations of education, namely early childhood development and preschool learning, are grossly underfunded, despite their being the areas of education that will benefit most learners and improve educational outcomes at all levels of education. The misalignment of budgets with social justice objectives also leads to high levels of inefficiency. The opportunity costs of misalignment are great because of high repetition and dropout rates, and skills deficits.

Secondly, educational policies allow for relational justice, with parental participation in educational governance. The lack of internalisation of human rights still leads to grievous assaults on relational justice, for example discrimi-

nation against learners who come from poor, marginalised groups, bullying, assaults, and corporal punishment.

Thirdly, educational curricula have not been decolonised. Policy documents do not speak to epistemic justice; policies do not speak to the integration of indigenous knowledge into curricula to overcome their ethnographic biases.

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Education for All? Unpacking Social Justice and Grassroots Policy Implementation: A Case Study of the Otjituuo Settlement

Tjipura Tjipura

Introduction

Namibia's post-independence educational landscape is defined by the aspirational brief, *Toward Education for All: A Development Brief for Education, Culture and Training* (Ministry of Education and Culture [MEC], 1993), and later formalised by the Basic Education Act (3 of 2020), which mandates free and compulsory basic education to ensure equitable, inclusive, and quality lifelong learning (Government of the Republic of Namibia [GRN], 2020). This national commitment aligns

with the philosophy of “education for liberation,” a progressive approach advocating for democratic participation and social transformation through the praxis of critical consciousness (Freire, 1972). However, as noted in recent scholarship, a persistent “gap between policy and practice” remains, particularly in rural and low-income settlements (Haingura, 2024).

This case study explores this disconnect by examining the lived realities at Otjituuo Primary School. While



Source: Tjipura Tjipura

national frameworks like Vision 2030 aim for a “knowledge-based society” with equal access for all ethnic groups (GRN, 2004), the grassroots implementation in Otjituuu reveals deep-seated systemic barriers that challenge the essence of social justice.

Key issues highlighted in the case study

- *Pedagogical silencing and academic hierarchy:* Field observations in Grade 4 reveal a classroom dynamic where academic performance dictates a learner’s right to participate. By informing lower-performing students that they “do not have the right to speak”, the educational process reinforces social stratification rather than the democratic liberation envisioned by Freire (1972) and Nyerere (1975).
- *Systemic resource depletion:* Despite the Basic Education Act’s promise of “reasonable facilities”, the school suffers from severe textbook shortages (specifically in English (18 books for 29 learners) and a total absence of materials for ICT and Arts), and deteriorating infrastructure, with over half of furniture requiring replacement (Tjipura, personal

communication (field notes), 2025).

- *Cultural erasure and linguistic marginalisation:* Although the Otjituuu settlement is home to a diverse population, including a significant San community (Ju|’hoansi speakers), the curriculum remains centered on Ovaherero culture (Orutjindu). The lack of indigenous language instruction for San learners represents a form of colonial erasure that contradicts the principles of “pedagogical justice” and cultural recognition (Banerjee & Mondal, 2026).
- *The nutrition-learning nexus:* The failure of the School Feeding Programme (*olombo*) to provide palatable or nutritious meals, resulting in students skipping meals despite 80% arriving at school without having had breakfast, highlights a critical failure in addressing the socioeconomic vulnerabilities of marginalised learners (Tjipura, 2025).

By documenting these grassroots experiences, this case study seeks to illustrate how the social forces of poverty, cultural neglect, and top-down bureaucratic inefficiencies impede the liberatory potential of education in Namibia’s rural settlements.

Background

The historical trajectory of education in Namibia is marked by a transition from a colonial system of segregation to a post-independence framework rooted in social justice and national reconciliation. Under the apartheid administration, education was used as a tool for subjugation, characterised by the “Bantu education” model which intentionally under-resourced schools for Black and marginalised communities (Amukugo, 2013). Since 1990, the Namibian government has sought to reverse this legacy, positioning education as a “tool for liberation” that empowers citizens to participate in a democratic society (Sanga, 2017).

The policy framework: A mandate for inclusion

The primary legal instrument governing this phenomenon is the Basic Education Act (2020, p.1), which mandates that the state provide “free and compulsory basic education” and ensure “equitable inclusive quality education” (Basic Education Act, 2020, p. 1). This is supported by the *Sector policy on inclusive education* (GRN, 2013), which explicitly aims to provide access to education for “educationally marginalized children”, including the San community and those living in extreme poverty (Hadula, 2024). These policies are intended to align with *Vision 2030*, which envisions a high-quality

education system that produces a skilled workforce and fosters social cohesion across all ethnic lines (GRN, 2004).

The concept of education for liberation

Central to this case study is the philosophy of education for liberation, largely influenced by the works of Julius Nyerere and Paulo Freire. As Sanga (2017, p.1) argues, education should not merely be about the acquisition of literacy, but about the “effective transformation that leads to the growth of society”. In the Namibian context, this means moving beyond “mere access” to “pedagogical justice,” where learners are treated as active participants in their own development rather than passive recipients of information (Banerjee & Mondal, 2026).

The local context: Otjituuo settlement

Otjituuo, located in the Okakarara Constituency of Otjozondjupa Region, serves as a critical site for examining the implementation of these high-level policies. The settlement is characterised by a “dual reality”: while it falls under the national mandate of Universal Primary Education, its geographical and socioeconomic isolation places it within the “education gap” identified by Haingura (2024). The community is home to a significant population of

the Jul'hoansi people, a San group who have been historically marginalised, and continue to be so in the post-independence era. Research indicates that rural settlements like Otjituuo often face “cultural and attitudinal barriers”, where the dominant language and curriculum may inadvertently erase the indigenous identities of minority groups (Hadula, 2024). The school serves as a microcosm of the settlement's challenges, where the pressures of poverty, migratory farm work, and the “neoliberal” constraints of school funding create a friction between national ideals and grassroots survival (Tjipura, 2025; Haingura, 2024).

Challenges

The implementation of “education for all” in the Otjituuo Settlement is hindered by a complex interplay of systemic, cultural, and socioeconomic barriers that exacerbate how rural schools often remain on the periphery of national development.

Pedagogical injustice and the silencing of learners

A critical challenge observed in the classroom is the emergence of an academic hierarchy that undermines the democratic principles of education for liberation. In Grade 4, it was observed that the teacher explicitly restricted the participation of lower-performing students, stating they “do

not have the right to speak” (Tjipura, 2025). This practice creates a culture of silencing that contradicts Freire's (1972) assertion that education should be a dialogue between equals. When academic performance is used as a gatekeeper for expression, the school ceases to be a tool for liberation and instead becomes a site for the “reproduction of social inequality” (Banerjee & Mondal, 2026).

Severe resource scarcity and infrastructure decay

While the Basic Education Act mandates the provision of reasonable facilities, Otjituuo Primary School faces a dire shortage of essential learning materials. The 2025 School Survey data from Grade 4B reveal:

- *Textbook deficits:* Core subjects such as English Second Language have only 18 textbooks for 29 learners, while non-promotional but essential subjects like ICT, Arts, and Life Skills have zero textbooks (Tjipura, 2025).
- *Infrastructure collapse:* The physical environment is equally strained, with 18 out of 33 chairs and 10 out of 18 double desks in Grade 4B currently in need of replacement (Tjipura, 2025). As Haingura (2024) notes, such resource constraints in

low-income rural communities significantly “bridge the gap” in the wrong direction, ensuring that rural learners remain at a competitive disadvantage compared to their urban counterparts.

Cultural erasure and linguistic barriers for the San community

The Otjituuo settlement serves a diverse student body, yet the curriculum and medium of instruction reflect a monocultural approach. Despite the presence of Jul’hoansi, Rukwangali, and Oshindonga speakers, the school utilises Otjiherero as the primary local language (Tjipura, 2025). San parents specifically reported that the lack of Jul’hoansi language instruction is a major deterrent to engagement. This “colonial erasure” of indigenous knowledge systems prevents education from being a truly liberating experience for marginalised minorities, as it fails to provide the “cultural recognition” necessary for substantive social justice (Hadula, 2024; Banerjee & Mondal, 2026).

Socioeconomic vulnerability and nutritional insecurity

The “lived reality” of the learners is defined by extreme poverty, which directly impacts their physical readiness to learn.

- *The feeding program failure:* Although a school feeding programme exists, learners reported skipping the *olombo* (porridge, or “pap”) because it was unpalatable or caused gastrointestinal distress (“running stomach”).
- *Domestic deprivation:* Four out of five interviewed learners reported going to school without breakfast, and many face “food-less nights” depending on their parents’ casual labour employment (Tjipura, 2025).
- *Migratory patterns:* Teachers reported that student retention is highly unstable, often dropping by 25–50% during the year as families migrate for farm work (Tjipura, 2025). This aligns with Haingura’s (2024) findings that economic instability in informal and rural settlements is a primary driver of school dropouts.

Actions

To navigate the “disconnect between policy formulation and on-the-ground realities”, local actors have implemented the following strategies:

Adaptive pedagogical strategies

- *Teachers’ resourcefulness:* In response to the total absence of textbooks for subjects like ICT,

Arts, and Life Skills, teachers have resorted to creating their own instructional materials. This includes using “imaginary diameters” and practical classroom examples to teach complex concepts when physical tools are unavailable.

- *Supplementary materials:* Educators frequently provide printed handouts for learners to paste into their notebooks, ensuring some level of continuity in a curriculum that was “rolled out without relevant materials”.

School administration and governance

- *Data-driven advocacy:* The school administration conducts regular surveys to document the exact condition of furniture and learner demographics, providing a factual basis for requests for regional intervention.
- *Cultural and extra-curricular integration:* To foster a sense of belonging for marginalised groups, the school maintains cultural groups for various traditions, including the Jul’hoansi and Kavango communities. These activities allow learners to “express themselves using their unique cultures”.

- *Career and motivational support:* The school invites influential community figures for “motivational speech days” and provides career guidance through the Life Skills teacher to help learners visualise opportunities beyond their current socioeconomic status.

Parental and community agency

- *Supplementing the feeding program:* Recognising that the state-provided *olombo* (porridge) is often rejected by children due to its taste or health effects, some parents provide small stipends (e.g., N\$5) for “fatcakes” (“*vetkoek*”) to ensure that their children do not learn on an empty stomach.
- *Strategic enrolment:* Many parents and students actively seek placement in the school hostel, viewing it as a safer environment with guaranteed access to water, electricity, and basic meals away from the “instability” of domestic settings.
- *Negotiating barriers:* Despite deep poverty, where many households survive on a single elder’s pension, parents continue to engage with the school to negotiate voluntary

contributions and discount schemes specifically aimed at Jul'hoansi learners.

Government-led reform efforts

At a national level, the government has implemented Universal Primary Education and rolled out new curricula intended to be more “flexible and high quality”. However, as local practitioners note, these are often “rushed”, with teachers not receiving the necessary training and material support for rural implementation.

Outcomes/Results

The outcomes of the localised actions taken at Otjituuo Primary School present a complex picture of partial successes overshadowed by persistent, deep-rooted systemic barriers. While community and educator agency have mitigated some immediate crises, the broader challenges of social justice and equitable policy implementation remain largely unaddressed.

Achievements

Localised pedagogical adaptations, such as the innovative use of “imaginary diameters” and teacher-generated handouts, have facilitated learning in ICT and Arts despite the absence of textbooks. While these measures serve

as temporary fixes, they highlight a significant resource shortfall from what is mandated by the Basic Education Act. Internal surveys have documented critical infrastructure needs, reporting that over 50% of Grade 4B's furniture requires replacement, providing a foundation for future advocacy without passively waiting for regional intervention. Cultural preservation initiatives allow diverse groups to maintain their identities, offering psychological support against cultural erasure in the curriculum. Additionally, the hostel placement for 21 out of 31 Grade 6A learners has noticeably enhanced their well-being by providing essential amenities and a conducive learning environment away from domestic pressures.

Unaddressed challenges

Persistent challenges in education include an “illiteracy gap,” where many learners are unprepared for the workforce or further education, indicating a quality issue rather than just access. School feeding programmes are inadequate, leaving 80% of students hungry, which affects their cognitive abilities. Additionally, the lack of Jul'hoansi language instruction marginalises San families, maintaining a disconnect in education. Bureaucratic inefficiencies further complicate reform efforts by obstructing prompt responses to school needs.

Conclusion

The actions in Otjituuo reflect a strong commitment to education for liberation, yet they are mainly “survival strategies” rather than effective long-term policies. A systemic change is essential to align national funding and curricula with the socioeconomic and cultural requirements of the settlement for the promise of education for all to be realised.

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Beyond Colonialities: Leveraging Ubuntu for Transformative Higher Education in Namibia

Bruno Venditto & Adalbertus Kamanzi

Abstract:

This article examines how the Southern African philosophy of Ubuntu, understood as part of a broader family of African relational-humanist philosophies, when framed through the lens of deep decoloniality, can serve as a transformative ethos for higher education in Namibia. While much of the decolonial turn has focused on dismantling Eurocentric curricula and hegemonic epistemologies, this study argues that transformation also requires confronting internal colonialities, elitist governance structures, exclusionary language policies, and neoliberal logics that persist within postcolonial institutions. Methodologically, the article employs qualitative document analysis of key national policies, curricular frameworks, and institutional prospectuses, complemented by a reflexive acknowledgement of the authors' positionality as lecturers and administrators within Namibian universities. The analysis was thematically guided by Ubuntu values of relational accountability, dignity, and communal flourishing, alongside decolonial critiques of knowledge hierarchies and neoliberal

instrumentalism. Findings reveal three persistent colonial residues in Namibian higher education: the privileging of Eurocentric and technocratic knowledge systems; the entrenchment of English as the gatekeeping language of academia; and the construction of graduates as market-oriented individuals rather



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than relational citizens. Despite rhetorical commitments to equity and transformation, policy and institutional documents show little evidence of Ubuntu as an epistemic or ethical framework. The article proposes a reorientation of higher education through Ubuntu and deep decoloniality as mutually reinforcing paradigms. This requires integrating indigenous epistemologies across curricula, advancing multilingual education, reforming assessment and pedagogy toward dialogical practices, and reframing graduate attributes around communal responsibility. By centring Ubuntu's ethic of interdependence and deep decoloniality's structural critique, Namibian higher education can move beyond symbolic reform toward substantive transformation. Ultimately, the article contributes to global debates on decolonisation by offering Ubuntu as both a normative ethos and a practical framework for achieving epistemic justice in African universities.

Keywords: Ubuntu, higher education, deep decoloniality, epistemic justice, Namibia, indigenous epistemologies

Introduction

Higher education in Namibia, like much of postcolonial Africa, continues to bear the deep structural, curricular, and epistemological imprints of colonialism and apartheid.

Universities in Namibia, like many postcolonial institutions across Africa, emerged from colonial and apartheid education systems that were explicitly designed to privilege Eurocentric knowledge systems, hierarchical governance structures, and linguistic exclusivity (Katjavivi, 1990; Amukugo, 1993). In the post-independence period, the continued dominance of these features has been less the result of deliberate intent than a structural inheritance, reinforced by the absence of fully codified and institutionally embedded African ontological and epistemological counter-frameworks capable of displacing colonial academic architectures. As a result, many post-independence reforms focused on expanding access and participation while leaving intact the underlying epistemic, linguistic, and governance architectures inherited from colonial rule, which then became normalised as neutral or universal academic standards. More than three decades after independence, these legacies remain entrenched in institutional cultures, with Western paradigms still dominating curricula and pedagogy at the expense of indigenous epistemologies. The persistence of these patterns has fuelled demands for decolonisation that go beyond symbolic inclusion of African content to call for a fundamental rethinking of the purposes, values, and processes of higher education (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013; Mbembe, 2016).

The urgency of this endeavour is underscored by the enduring coloniality of power and knowledge. Maldonado-Torres (2007) describes coloniality as the long-lasting structures of domination that persist after the end of formal colonial rule. In Namibia, this is evident in the continued dominance of Western epistemologies framed as universal, the privileging of English as the sole medium of academic engagement, and elitist governance practices that marginalise rural and indigenous students. These structures reproduce epistemic injustice, excluding local knowledges and voices from recognition within the academy (Fricker, 2007; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018).

Yet much of the global discourse on decolonisation has remained preoccupied with dismantling external legacies, removing Eurocentric canons or diversifying curricula, while paying insufficient attention to what may be called internal colonialities. These are the inequities, exclusions, and hierarchical practices sustained within postcolonial institutions themselves, (Bhambra et al., 2018; Smith, 2021).

The Namibian case offers a clear illustration, where internal colonialities are evident in governance structures that marginalise student and junior faculty voices, appointment procedures that privilege urban

elites, and linguistic standards that disadvantage non-English speakers (Brock-Utne, 2014; Zeeman, 2016). Such manifestations, however, are far from unique to Namibia; they constitute a widespread dimension of the decolonial struggle globally. The endurance of these endogenous power structures, whether observed as administrative rigidities, nepotistic networks, or reinvented social hierarchies, demonstrates how the transformative potential of education is frequently frustrated by localised systems of exclusion. Consequently, a substantive decolonial project must address this dual imperative: it requires the dismantling of enduring external imperial frameworks alongside the active transformation of internalised practices that perpetuate coloniality's exclusionary logic.

This article responds to these intersecting challenges by mobilising the African philosophy of Ubuntu as a normative and operational ethos for higher education transformation in Namibia. Ubuntu, grounded in communalism, dignity, and relational accountability, provides an onto-epistemological framework for reimagining education as a liberatory and inclusive process (Letseka, 2012; Metz, 2011).

The Ubuntu philosophy posits that human identity is fundamentally

formed through relationships with others (Venditto & Amupolo, 2025). This relational ontology contrasts with dominant liberal epistemic traditions that have historically prioritised the autonomous subject and individual ownership of knowledge, particularly within modern institutional and legal frameworks. This contrast, however, should not be overstated or essentialised. Practices of knowledge hoarding, secrecy, and the treatment of expertise as personal property have existed within African societies as well, sometimes leading to the loss of indigenous knowledge when it was not transmitted beyond individual custodians. Ubuntu is therefore not invoked here as a descriptive claim about all African knowledge practices, but as a normative ethical counter-framework, one that challenges both colonial and local traditions of epistemic enclosure by re-centring knowledge within relational responsibility, intergenerational transmission, and communal accountability. In this sense, Ubuntu functions not as a romanticised account of African epistemic practice, but as a critical ethical horizon against which both imported and locally reproduced forms of epistemic power can be interrogated, (Muxe Nkondo, 2007; Matahela, 2025).

When applied to higher education, this relational worldview necessitates a profound shift in perspective. It invites

an institutional culture and pedagogical practice grounded not exclusively in competition and individual achievement, but in principles of solidarity, mutual reciprocity, and restorative justice. This orientation should not be understood as uniquely African or as standing in opposition to all Western pedagogical traditions. Indeed, collaborative learning, cooperative knowledge production, and dialogical pedagogy have long been theorised and promoted within multiple educational traditions, including Nordic pedagogical frameworks that significantly influenced teacher education reforms in Namibia during the post-independence period. The distinctive contribution of Ubuntu, however, lies not in the novelty of collaboration as a pedagogical technique, but in its ethical and ontological grounding. Ubuntu situates collaboration within a moral framework of relational responsibility, communal accountability, and historical repair. In this sense, re-evaluating teaching methods toward collaborative knowledge production is not merely a didactic choice, but part of a broader institutional commitment to fostering learning environments where community well-being is central and where structures exist to address harm and historical inequities within the academic community.

Crucially, Ubuntu is here framed through the lens of *deep decoloniality* (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018), which insists

on moving beyond surface critiques of Eurocentrism to interrogate both external colonial legacies and internal institutional hierarchies. Deep decoloniality recognises that colonial residues persist not only in imported knowledge systems but also in local bureaucratic cultures, neoliberal reforms, and internalised exclusions. In the Namibian context, this perspective illuminates how universities simultaneously remain tethered to colonial logics and reproduce new forms of inequality through technocratic and market-driven reforms.

Taken together, Ubuntu and deep decoloniality offer a dual lens for educational transformation. Ubuntu contributes the ethical grounding of relational accountability and communal flourishing, while deep decoloniality provides the critical apparatus for dismantling epistemic hierarchies and neoliberal instrumentalism. Their intersection enables a vision of higher education that is both deconstructive and reconstructive: it dismantles colonial residues while proposing alternatives rooted in African philosophies of justice.

The significance of this intervention is threefold. First, it extends decolonial scholarship by explicitly connecting Ubuntu and deep decoloniality as mutually reinforcing paradigms for higher education transformation.

While Ubuntu has been widely discussed in ethics, governance, and development (Louw, 2010; Gade, 2012), its application to higher education remains underdeveloped. Second, the article contributes to scholarship on Namibian education, providing a critical analysis of policy and institutional documents that reveals the persistence of colonial residues despite rhetorical commitments to equity. Third, it offers practical pathways for embedding Ubuntu in curriculum design, pedagogy, and institutional governance, thereby linking theory to practice.

Methodologically the research has combined a critical-interpretivist orientation with document analysis and Ubuntu-inflected reflexivity. This design allows the study to interrogate how Namibian education policies and institutional frameworks articulate, omit, or distort the values of Ubuntu and the aspirations of deep decoloniality. By treating documents as contested sites of meaning rather than neutral instruments, the analysis illuminates how higher education can be simultaneously complicit in reproducing colonial residues and open to transformative reorientation. This approach aligns with the decolonial orientation of the study, treating documents not as neutral texts but as sites where power, identity, and epistemology are negotiated.

The analysis is complemented by reflexive positionality, with the authors recognising their dual roles as participants in and critics of Namibian higher education.

The argument proceeds as follows: the second section outlines the theoretical pillars of Ubuntu and deep decoloniality; the third details the methodological approach of document analysis and reflexivity; the fourth situates Namibian higher education in its historical and structural context; the fifth presents findings on curriculum, language, pedagogy, ethics, and graduate visions, highlighting the persistence of colonial residues; the sixth discusses practical pathways for embedding Ubuntu in higher education transformation; and the seventh concludes by reaffirming the potential of Ubuntu, framed through deep decoloniality, to reimagine higher education as a site of liberation, relational accountability, and epistemic justice.

Theoretical Framework

This study rests on two interrelated pillars: Ubuntu as an onto-epistemological framework, and deep decoloniality as a pathway to “education for liberation”. Together, they provide the ethical and analytical foundation for reimagining higher education in Namibia as relational, inclusive, and emancipatory.

Ubuntu locates human identity within relationships. The maxim “*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*”, (“a person is a person through other persons”),¹ captures the essence of Ubuntu as both a social ethic and a way of knowing (Ramose, 2002, p. 41). Far from being a moral slogan, Ubuntu functions simultaneously as an ontology (a way of being) and an epistemology (a way of knowing). It shapes how individuals understand self, community, and the purposes of education.

It is important to clarify the philosophical scope of Ubuntu as used in this study. Ubuntu is historically and linguistically rooted in Southern Africa, particularly among Nguni-speaking communities, and should not be uncritically universalised as a pan-African philosophy. Rather than treating Ubuntu as representative of all African thought, this article positions it as a Southern African articulation of a wider African relational-humanist tradition. Comparable philosophies exist across the continent, including *Ujamaa* in East Africa, *Omolúàbí* among the Yoruba, *Maàt* in ancient Egyptian ethical thought, and deliberative traditions such as *palaver* in West and Central Africa, (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2022; Mthimkhulu, 2024).

¹ Often translated as “I am because we are”.

These traditions share a common ethical grammar emphasising relational personhood, communal responsibility, dignity, and moral accountability, even though they emerge from distinct historical and cultural contexts (Jecker & Atuire, 2025).

Ubuntu is retained as the primary analytical anchor in this study for three reasons. First, the empirical focus is Namibia, where Ubuntu resonates historically, culturally, and normatively. Second, Ubuntu has been extensively theorised within contemporary African philosophy and applied scholarship, providing a coherent ethical and epistemological framework for institutional analysis. Third, anchoring the discussion in Ubuntu allows the article to advance a context-sensitive decolonial argument without collapsing Africa's philosophical diversity into a single homogenised tradition.

In educational contexts, Ubuntu challenges liberal traditions that frame knowledge as an individual possession and learning as a competitive pursuit, advocating instead for interdependence, mutual care, and restorative justice (Letseka, 2012; Metz, 2011). From this perspective, education is not merely credential acquisition, but the cultivation of persons committed to communal flourishing (Waghid & Smeyers, 2012). Ubuntu also disrupts

the assumption that knowledge is neutral or universally interpretable independent of context, emphasising its embeddedness within social, relational, and ecological contexts. From this perspective, epistemic authority is not grounded solely in formal abstraction but in the capacity of knowledge to remain accountable to the realities, relationships, and practices through which meaning is produced. This does not imply relativism, but rather epistemic humility: the recognition that reasoning gains validity through its attunement to context, not through detachment from it. Knowledge is relational, embedded in lived realities, and accountable to the community (Chilisa, 2012). In the Namibian context, this calls for centring indigenous epistemologies, such as oral traditions and communal problem-solving, as legitimate forms of knowledge production.

Pedagogically, Ubuntu reconfigures teacher-student relationships toward dialogical engagement and shared responsibility, creating a community of inquiry where knowledge is co-constructed (Letseka, 2012; Ramose, 2002). Studies show that it promotes participatory learning and communal accountability, transforming rather than abolishing teacher authority (Waghid & Smeyers, 2012), which is reconfigured as relational rather than hierarchical. Ubuntu also counters

neoliberal commodification of education, which is also evident in Namibia and frames students as clients and knowledge as a product (Cloete et al., 2018). It offers a counter-ethos by insisting that education should be inherently relational and moral, and oriented towards collective flourishing. This vision is particularly urgent in contexts where market-driven reforms risk deepening inequality. Finally, in postcolonial contexts, it advances justice by restoring dignity, relationships, and solidarity, demanding that higher education address epistemic injustice and embrace inclusive knowledge systems.

The second theoretical pillar is deep decoloniality. Building on the work of Quijano (2007), Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015), and Mignolo and Walsh (2018), this perspective insists that coloniality endures not as an abstract historical residue, but as a structure of power actively reproduced through social relations, class formations, and struggles over privilege long after the end of formal colonial rule. Coloniality is sustained not only by former colonial elites, but also by postcolonial actors, including liberation movements, political leaders, technocrats, and institutional elites, who may inherit, normalise, and benefit from the very power arrangements they once opposed. Deep decoloniality therefore demands reflexivity: it asks not only

who holds power, but how power reshapes those who hold it, and how difficult it is, in practice, to relinquish the material, symbolic, and security privileges that accompany positions of authority. Within higher education, decoloniality is often framed as diversifying curricula or rejecting Eurocentrism. While necessary, such efforts risk being tokenistic if they leave untouched the deeper hierarchies embedded in local institutions. Deep decoloniality pushes further by interrogating both external colonial legacies and internalised exclusions, what Maldonado-Torres (2007) terms the coloniality of being and the coloniality of knowledge. In Namibia, deep decoloniality entails examining not only the historical legacies of German and South African domination but also contemporary practices, such as exclusive reliance on English as the academic medium, undervaluing of indigenous epistemologies, hierarchical governance that silences junior voices, and neoliberal framing of universities as market actors.

These practices reproduce epistemic injustice by privileging Eurocentric norms while marginalising local knowledges. At the core of it all, deep decoloniality seeks epistemic justice, the coexistence of multiple knowledge traditions without hierarchy (Dei, 2016). This vision resonates with Santos's (2014) ecology of knowledges,

which affirms scientific, indigenous, oral, and experiential knowledges as mutually enriching. Deep decoloniality also aligns with Freire's (1970/2007) call for education for liberation. Education should enable learners to critically "read the world" and act upon it.

For Namibia, this means creating spaces where students are not passive recipients of imported theories but active co-creators drawing on their languages, cultures, and lived realities. Ubuntu strengthens this by rooting liberation in African communal ethics, ensuring that transformation is collective rather than individualised. Practically, deep decoloniality requires systemic change: curricula must shift from Eurocentric dominance to pluriversal frameworks; pedagogies must move from top-down instruction to participatory practices; institutional cultures must democratise decision-making and challenge elitism; and policy frameworks must resist reducing education to economic utility. Thus, deep decoloniality provides the critical apparatus to dismantle oppressive structures while imagining alternatives.

While Ubuntu and deep decoloniality can be developed independently, this study treats them as mutually reinforcing. Ubuntu contributes an ethical orientation rooted in relational accountability, while deep decoloniality offers a structural critique of enduring

hierarchies. Their intersection creates a transformative praxis capable of both dismantling and rebuilding. This dual perspective is crucial for Namibia's higher education. Ubuntu alone risks being dismissed as cultural nostalgia, while decoloniality alone risks reproducing binaries of "Western" versus "African" knowledge. Taken together, they open a middle ground: Ubuntu ensures that transformation is constructive and community-oriented, while deep decoloniality ensures that it is critical and systemic. The resulting framework is both deconstructive and reconstructive. It deconstructs the colonial residues embedded in curricula, pedagogy, language, and institutional cultures. Simultaneously, it reconstructs education around relationality, inclusivity, and communal flourishing.

Applied to Namibia, this means reimagining higher education not simply as human capital production but as a moral and political project of building just, inclusive, and culturally grounded institutions. More broadly, it situates Namibia within continental debates on educational justice, positioning Ubuntu and deep decoloniality as contributions to pluriversal knowledge futures.

Methodology

The methodological orientation of this study is informed by a dual

commitment to a critical decolonial paradigm and the Ubuntu ethos as a normative research ethic. This choice is deliberate: any attempt to interrogate the colonialities embedded in Namibia's higher education system must simultaneously challenge the methodological orthodoxies that reproduce them. The study therefore rejects positivist claims of neutrality and objectivity, embracing instead an interpretive approach that treats knowledge as socially constructed, historically situated, and entangled with power (Schwandt, 1994). In this respect it aligns with decolonial scholarship that critiques the presumed universality of Western epistemologies (Smith, 2021), while Ubuntu functions as an ethical compass emphasising relational accountability, mutual recognition, and communal responsibility.

This orientation has concrete implications for how data were selected and interpreted. Documents were not approached as inert bureaucratic artefacts, but as discursive sites where struggles over knowledge, identity, and justice are negotiated. The analysis sought not only to describe what was written, but to examine how values of inclusivity, dignity, and interdependence were embodied, resisted, or silenced within these texts.

The study employed qualitative document analysis (Bowen, 2009),

focusing on texts that collectively shape Namibia's educational landscape. The selection followed a purposive sampling approach, specifically targeting documents with the greatest normative authority and practical influence on the design of curricula, pedagogy, and institutional culture. These texts were categorised into two critical groups that shape the educational landscape: i) national frameworks, which set the foundational orientation for education, and ii) university documents, which represent the operationalisation of these directives at the institutional level.

At the national level, core frameworks analysed included the 2015 National Curriculum for Basic Education (NCBE) (Republic of Namibia, 2016), which governs the pedagogical and curricular philosophy at school level, and Vision 2030 (Republic of Namibia, 2004), the long-term development blueprint that positions education at the centre of transformation. *Namibia's Sixth National Development Plan* (NDP6) was included for its articulation of strategies linking higher education to economic growth and youth empowerment, alongside supplementary frameworks such as the *Education and Training Sector Improvement Programme* (ETSIP) and the *Harambee Prosperity Plan I* (2016/17–2019/20) and *II* (2021–2025). At the institutional level, the analysis

focused on prospectuses from the University of Namibia (UNAM) and the Namibia University of Science and Technology (NUST), as they concretely set out curricular orientations and graduate attributes.

Taken together, these texts span foundational national visions and their operationalisation at the institutional level, offering a layered picture of how higher education is envisioned and regulated in Namibia.

Analysis unfolded in three iterative stages inspired by thematic content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, an inductive reading identified recurrent concerns across documents, including curriculum design, language policy, pedagogical models, ethical frameworks, and graduate visions. Second, these concerns were refined into themes by aligning them with Ubuntu's emphasis on humanness, interdependence, and communal flourishing, and with decolonial critiques of Eurocentrism, neoliberalism, and exclusion. Finally, each theme was interpreted through an Ubuntu-inflected lens to assess how relational values were affirmed, contradicted, or silenced. This interpretive synthesis combined fidelity to the texts with a normative critique, highlighting both explicit articulations and systematic absences. Direct quotations were used not

only as empirical evidence but also as discursive artefacts that reveal underlying epistemic assumptions.

Ensuring rigour in a study of this nature required criteria distinct from conventional notions of validity or reliability. Following Lincoln and Guba (1985), three principles were emphasised: credibility, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was enhanced by triangulating across institutional, sectoral, and national documents to identify systemic patterns rather than isolated claims. Dependability was supported by systematic documentation of analytic decisions and coding procedures. Confirmability was strengthened through reflexivity, which demanded continuous self-interrogation of how the researchers' positions shaped interpretation.

This reflexivity was particularly important given the authors' embeddedness in Namibian higher education as lecturers, researchers, and administrators. Such positionality offered insider knowledge of institutional dynamics but also carried the risk of bias. The challenge was to treat this embeddedness not as a liability but as a resource, while remaining vigilant against reproducing the very logics under critique. Reflexivity was enacted through iterative discussions, transparency in analytic decisions, and

explicit acknowledgement of the dual role of being both participants in and critics of the system.

Ethical considerations were equally central. Although the study relied on publicly available documents, Ubuntu's ethic of relational accountability shaped the interpretive stance. Documents were treated as products of collective negotiation embedded within Namibia's colonial and postcolonial trajectories. The purpose was not to disparage institutional efforts but to expose silences and propose pathways for transformation. In this sense, engagement with the texts was carried out in a spirit of contribution rather than extraction, consistent with Ubuntu's commitment to respect, dignity, and restorative practice.

Nonetheless, the study recognises its limitations. Document analysis cannot capture the lived experiences of students and faculty, which means the findings represent only one dimension of higher education's colonial residues. The focus on official texts may also overlook informal practices and micro-level negotiations that shape institutional culture. Finally, the authors' positionalities, while acknowledged, may still have influenced interpretations in ways not fully mitigated by reflexivity. Future studies would benefit from triangulating document analysis with interviews, ethnographic observation,

or participatory methods that foreground student and community voices.

Contextualising Namibian Higher Education

Historical and structural legacies

The trajectory of higher education in Namibia cannot be understood apart from the country's colonial and apartheid past. German colonial rule (1884–1915) and South African apartheid administration (1915–1990) both used education as an instrument of domination, embedding structures that privileged Eurocentric knowledge, restricted access for the majority, and reinforced racial hierarchies (Katjavivi, 1990; Amukugo, 1993). During the apartheid era, the education system was deliberately fragmented and underfunded for Black Namibians, producing a labour force confined to subordinate roles. Opportunities for higher learning within Namibia were severely limited for the majority.

Prior to independence, the main institution for tertiary education was the Academy for Tertiary Education, established in 1980 and affiliated with the University of South Africa (UNISA). This Academy, however, also became a significant site for student resistance against the apartheid regime. Following independence in 1990, the

Academy served as the direct precursor to the new national universities. Both UNAM, officially established in 1992, and NUST, which later evolved from the Polytechnic division, grew out of this Academy.

This historical exclusion and resistance meant that Namibia entered independence with a higher education infrastructure that was both a legacy of colonial control and a product of liberation struggles.

The post-independence higher and tertiary education system, anchored initially in the establishment of the University of Namibia, was thus burdened with a dual mandate: to function as an instrument of national reconstruction and social equity (Ministry of Education, 2005), while simultaneously redressing deep-seated epistemic injustices, including the marginalisation of indigenous knowledge and the denigration of African cultural identity. Yet, while structural expansion occurred, the epistemological foundations of higher education remained deeply shaped by colonial legacies. Curricula continued to rely on Euro-American theories, teaching was conducted almost exclusively in English, and institutional cultures replicated bureaucratic and hierarchical models inherited from colonial administrations.

As decolonial scholars argue, the end of colonialism did not automatically dismantle coloniality; the “coloniality of power” and “coloniality of knowledge” persist so long as institutions reproduce Eurocentric epistemologies as the norm (Quijano, 2007; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015). Namibia’s universities, despite their developmental mandate, have remained tethered to such logics, creating a paradox of independence with expanded access to education but limited epistemic transformation.

Language is a particularly complex and revealing site of postcolonial tension. English, adopted as the official language at independence, replaced Afrikaans as the lingua franca of public life and academia. This decision was politically expedient and symbolically powerful, distancing the nation from apartheid and facilitating international engagement. At the same time, it entrenched English as the dominant medium of higher education. Importantly, the dominance of a single language is not unique to Namibia or to colonial modernity; throughout history, hegemonic languages have emerged through conquest, religion, trade, empire, science, and, in contemporary times, globalisation and the internet. English today functions as a global academic and technological tool rather than solely as a colonial imposition. The question of language justice, therefore,

does not lie in the mere existence of a dominant language, but in how access to that language is distributed and how linguistic difference is institutionally valued. In Namibia, students from urban and elite backgrounds tend to benefit from early and sustained exposure to English, while indigenous-language speakers, particularly those from rural areas, encounter structural disadvantages within English-medium higher education (Brock-Utne, 2022). This produces a paradox: a policy intended to unify the nation and expand opportunity simultaneously reproduces inequality when the linguistic tool of access is unevenly available. This paradox is further deepened by social practice. Even as educators and policymakers rightly affirm that learners acquire foundational understanding most effectively in their mother tongue, many privileged families actively seek English-medium education for their own children, recognising the symbolic and material capital attached to English proficiency. From a deep decolonial perspective, this contradiction illustrates how language functions as both a practical resource and a mechanism of power. Ubuntu reframes language justice not as the rejection of English, but as an ethical demand for equitable access, institutional multilingualism, and the recognition of indigenous languages as legitimate carriers of knowledge rather than preparatory or subordinate mediums.

Institutional culture further illustrates continuity with the old system; universities continue in fact, to operate with top-down decision-making structures and managerial models that prioritise compliance, efficiency, and hierarchy. Participation by students and junior faculty is often limited, reinforcing what Maldonado-Torres (2007) terms the “coloniality of being,” where institutional relations are marked more by alienation and exclusion than recognition and solidarity.

Contemporary challenges

The post-independence expansion of higher education has been significant, with enrolments growing and participation broadening across gender and regional lines. Yet inequalities remain pronounced. Students from rural and low-income backgrounds continue to face financial barriers and linguistic marginalisation, and are inadequately prepared due to weak schooling systems. These barriers—financial constraints, inadequate schooling preparation, and linguistic marginalisation—are widely recognised in education research as factors that negatively influence student persistence and completion, particularly for disadvantaged groups. While national longitudinal data on attrition and graduation disaggregated by background remain limited in Namibia,

existing studies suggest that students from rural, low-income, and non-English background contexts face systemic challenges that can impede progression and timely completion (Zeeman, 2016; Brock-Utne, 2022).

Additionally, curriculum design reveals a tension between global competitiveness and local relevance. Pressures to align with international standards have driven universities to emphasise employability, innovation, and market readiness. While these goals are valuable, they often privilege neoliberal values of efficiency, competition, and individual achievement, sidelining indigenous epistemologies and community engagement (Teferra, 2021). The result is an education system oriented toward preparing graduates for global labour markets rather than equipping them to address the social and developmental challenges of their communities.

National policy frameworks mirror this technocratic orientation. *Vision 2030*, the Harambee Prosperity Plans, and successive National Development Plans consistently frame higher education as an engine of economic growth. Universities are positioned as drivers of productivity and competitiveness, with less attention paid to their roles in cultural revitalisation, ethical formation, or critical citizenship. This reflects what Giroux (2014) describes as the

neo-liberalisation of higher education, in which universities are reimagined as market actors rather than public institutions serving justice and democracy.

This neo-liberal corporatisation, a global phenomenon, profoundly shapes curriculum development, subordinating academic priorities to the imperative of income generation. The logic of the market instigates a relentless scramble for student enrolments, which becomes the primary driver for creating new academic programmes. Consequently, there is systemic pressure to prioritise “market-responsive” degrees, typically in fields like business, technology, and applied sciences, that appeal to fee-paying students and align with narrow economic indicators. This creates a self-reinforcing cycle where curriculum design is dictated by revenue potential rather than intellectual coherence or societal need. As a result, disciplines fundamental to a critical and humane education, particularly the humanities, social sciences, and critical studies, are deemed “unviable” within this market paradigm and systematically marginalised and underfunded. This scramble does not render income generation and critical inquiry inherently incompatible. Rather, it restructures institutional priorities in ways that systematically privilege revenue-generating activities over forms of knowledge production whose value is not immediately quan-

tifiable. Under such conditions, critical inquiry, civic formation, and socially reflexive scholarship are not eliminated, but are increasingly marginalised, under-resourced, or required to justify themselves in market terms. Over time, this recalibration of incentives and institutional attention constrains the university's capacity to sustain autonomous critical inquiry and to cultivate engaged citizens as a central, rather than residual, academic purpose. As Giroux (2014) and Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) argue, the risk lies not in market engagement per se, but in the displacement of academic judgment by market logics as the primary organising principle of institutional life.

Leadership and governance structures reinforce these dynamics. Institutional decision-making remains hierarchical, often concentrating power at the top and limiting participatory inclusion. Such structures undermine the dialogical ethos necessary for decolonised education, replicating elitism and alienation within institutions meant to promote social equity.

Together, these challenges highlight the limitations of reform strategies that focus narrowly on access, efficiency, or human capital production.

While Namibia has made progress in widening participation and improving gender balance, deeper issues remain

unresolved. The persistent epistemic exclusion is evident in curricula that continue to privilege Western canons and methodologies while marginalising indigenous knowledge systems, oral histories, and locally generated epistemologies. Furthermore, there is a prevalent institutional culture that manifests in top-down governance that generally silences student and junior faculty voices, using pedagogical approaches that prioritise passive knowledge reception over critical co-creation, and a pervasive neoliberal ethos that frames students as clients. Critically, these institutions often remain deeply patriarchal, as evidenced by the underrepresentation of women in senior academic and leadership positions, and gendered biases in curriculum content. These unresolved issues ensure that the transformative potential of higher education remains largely unfulfilled, as the very structures of knowledge, power, and belonging continue to alienate those they are meant to serve.

Why Ubuntu matters in this context

These historical and contemporary dynamics illustrate why Ubuntu is often proposed as a compelling framework for higher education transformation in Namibia. By emphasising relationality, mutual recognition, and collective flourishing, Ubuntu offers a

philosophical and ethical counterpoint to technocratic and neoliberal reform logics. However, Ubuntu is not immune to the dynamics of power that have shaped postcolonial institutions. Like other emancipatory frameworks, it can be appropriated, instrumentalised, or reduced to symbolic rhetoric when embedded within hierarchical bureaucratic systems controlled by political, managerial, or academic elites. For this reason, Ubuntu cannot be treated as a moral guarantee or cultural essence. Its transformative potential depends on the conditions of its institutionalisation. When detached from participatory governance, material redistribution, and mechanisms of downward accountability, Ubuntu risks reproducing the very exclusions it seeks to overcome. It is precisely here that deep decoloniality becomes indispensable: by foregrounding reflexivity, power analysis, and the continuous interrogation of privilege, deep decoloniality functions as a safeguard against the elite capture of Ubuntu, insisting that relational ethics be translated into concrete institutional practices rather than managerial discourse.

When combined with deep decoloniality, Ubuntu becomes more than an ethic of care; it becomes a praxis of structural transformation. It challenges the persistence of coloniality in curricula, languages, and governance, while also proposing constructive

alternatives. In this sense, Namibia offers a critical site for exploring how African philosophies can reshape postcolonial universities—not only by dismantling external Eurocentric residues, but also by confronting the internal colonialities sustained by neoliberal and elitist institutional cultures.

Namibia's higher education sector thus stands at a crossroads. On the one hand, it has expanded and diversified since independence, offering new opportunities for learning and nation-building. On the other, it continues to reproduce colonial legacies and neoliberal exclusions, undermining its transformative potential. Understanding these tensions is essential for situating the findings that follow. The analysis of documents presented in Section 5 reveals how these historical legacies and contemporary pressures play out in curricular frameworks, language policies, pedagogical models, ethical orientations, and graduate visions. It also shows how Ubuntu, framed through deep decoloniality, offers a pathway for moving beyond symbolic reform toward substantive transformation.

Findings

The analysis of Namibia's education/policy documents reveals persistent colonial residues. These residues manifest in three domains: the privileging of Eurocentric and technocratic knowledge systems, the entrenchment of

English as the gatekeeping language of academia, and the dominance of neoliberal ethics in shaping graduate visions.

Curriculum and knowledge systems

Curriculum frameworks across schooling and higher education reveal an overriding concern with economic competitiveness and market readiness. The NCBE situates itself explicitly within Vision 2030's developmentalist agenda:

The National Curriculum for Basic Education ... ensures continuity of the foundation principles of the Namibian education system as described in Toward Education for All (1993). The goal, aims, competencies, core skills and key learning areas have been identified in relation to Namibia Vision 2030 and are presented as a curriculum for the future. (Republic of Namibia, 2016)

Here, "relevance" is tied to alignment with global change rather than to indigenous philosophies or Ubuntu's ethic of relationality. The document further explains that:

The knowledge, skills, values and attitudes which learners can acquire are infinite. The developers

have made a careful selection of the timeless and the new, in order to find a delicate balance to ensure that our curriculum remains relevant. (Republic of Namibia, 2016)

Although framed as balance, this selection is silent on African epistemologies, thereby perpetuating the coloniality of knowledge (Mignolo, 2011).

At the university level, NUST underscores its responsiveness to external market conditions:

Due to the rapidly changing external environment that many programmes operate in, and the University's desire to remain constantly relevant in its offerings, some programmes may be significantly amended after publication of this Prospectus. (NUST, 2024)

The programmes listed, such as Bachelor of Economics, Bachelor of Accounting, and Bachelor of Business Management, reinforce a technocratic orientation where employability and managerial competence are central, while there is no mention of African epistemologies.

UNAM, though broader in scope, reproduces a similar framing. The School of Humanities, Society & Development declares that its mission

is to “promote excellence in teaching and research; develop critical, analytical and conceptual capacities within inter-related fields of knowledge; offer consultancies in the areas of applied social sciences; [and] promote community service” (UNAM, 2025).

The mention of community service suggests a social role, yet the dominant emphasis is on excellence, consultancy, and professionalisation. This orientation is reinforced in programme objectives that seek to:

develop ... the skills and competencies necessary for meeting the professional needs of society, particularly those of teachers, health, media, information, language specialists, translators, managers, environmentalists, social workers, religious leaders and professionals in cultural expression and the arts”. (UNAM, 2025)

These formulations do not render technical expertise and relational citizenship inherently incompatible. Rather, they tend to privilege a narrowly technocratic conception of the graduate, emphasising professional functionality and sectoral service while marginalising the relational, ethical, and communal dimensions of higher education. As a result, graduates are primarily imagined as market-ready specialists, with commitments

to communal flourishing and social responsibility treated as being supplementary rather than integral to professional formation. From an Ubuntu perspective, technical competence and relational accountability are mutually reinforcing, but current institutional framings rarely integrate them as co-constitutive dimensions of graduate identity. National development plans confirm this utilitarian orientation. NDP6 defines education’s underlying strategy as “the diversification of the Namibian economy, natural resources beneficiation and youth empowerment” (Republic of Namibia, 2025).

Vision 2030 goes further, proclaiming that:

As required by this Vision, the country will operate a totally integrated, unified, flexible and high-quality education and training system, that prepares Namibian learners to take advantage of a rapidly changing global environment, including developments in science and technology. (Republic of Namibia, 2004)

Such framings cast education as an engine of modernisation, with little recognition of Ubuntu’s relational justice or indigenous knowledge systems. Namibia’s curricular landscape hence remains tied to Eurocentric and neoliberal paradigms, producing

technically skilled individuals for markets rather than relational beings rooted in communal responsibility.

Language policy and pedagogy

Language emerges as a key site of epistemic injustice. The NCBE acknowledges the importance of mother tongues: “The mother tongue is integral to one’s identity and culture, and must be promoted. Children learn best through the medium of the Mother Tongue. English as medium of instruction is phased in at Grade 4” (Republic of Namibia, 2016).

However, this acknowledgement is quickly qualified. The NCBE specifies that: “Grade 4 is a transitional year where the medium of learning changes from the Mother Tongue/predominant local language to English. In Grade 4 the Mother Tongue will only be used in a supportive role” (Republic of Namibia, 2016).

By Grade 6, English is firmly established: “English has a special role in the Namibian situation as the official language and the medium of instruction from Grade 6 upwards” (Republic of Namibia, 2016). This transition entrenches a hierarchy in which indigenous languages are tolerated in the early years but displaced by English as the legitimate medium of knowledge.

University-level documents reinforce this privileging of English. NUST requires that: “English for Academic Purposes ... is compulsory ... Professional Writing ... and Professional Communication ... are compulsory, subject to the requirements of the respective degree programmes” (NUST, 2024).

Additional foreign languages such as “French, German, Portuguese and Spanish” are offered, but Namibian languages are absent from systematic academic use.

UNAM’s School of Humanities, Society & Development prospectus demonstrates some recognition of linguistic diversity through modules in Oshiwambo, Otjiherero, and Namibian Sign Language. For instance, Oshiwambo Applied Language enables students to: “communicate without undue effort in a variety of formal and informal situations ... write formal documents ... and react appropriately in a variety of different social and cultural settings” (UNAM, 2025).

While commendable, such modules remain electives, and the compulsory course, English Communication and Study Skills, confirms the primacy of English and is designed to help students to “cope with studying in a new academic environment and in a language which may not be their first language” (UNAM, 2025).

National frameworks naturalise this hierarchy. Vision 2030 recalls: “After Independence the new Constitution adopted English as the official language of Namibia, without trying to diminish in status other Namibian languages” (Republic of Namibia, 2004).

Yet the structural reality is that indigenous languages have been diminished by exclusion from higher education. From an Ubuntu perspective, this regime undermines dignity and recognition, as language is central to relational identity. From a decolonial standpoint, the elevation of English reproduces colonial hierarchies of knowledge.

Ethics, assessment, and graduate vision

The third domain concerns ethics, pedagogy, and graduate aspirations. Documents consistently frame education in liberal-democratic and neoliberal terms, with little recognition of Ubuntu’s communitarian ethos.

The NCBE articulates values such as:

... to foster the highest moral and ethical values of reliability, co-operation, democracy, tolerance, mutual understanding, and service to others; to develop the learner’s social responsibility towards other individuals, family life, the

community and the nation as a whole ... (Republic of Namibia, 2016)

It also highlights “integrity, responsibility, equality and reverence for life”. While laudable, these values reflect liberal universalism rather than relational accountability. Pedagogy and assessment likewise reinforce individualism.

The NCBE specifies that assessment must reflect “the learner’s actual level of achievement ... and [is] not related to how well other learners are achieving” (Republic of Namibia, 2016). UNAM and NUST replicate this model: “Continuous assessment 60%; Examination 40% (1 x 3-hour examination paper)” (UNAM, 2025); “Students must achieve a minimum of 50% in each component of the assessment to pass a course” (NUST, 2024).

Such formulations quantify learning as individual attainment rather than communal knowledge construction, echoing Freire’s (1970/2007) critique of the “banking model.” Ubuntu, by contrast, conceives learning as dialogical and collective, making current assessment regimes a colonial holdover.

Graduate visions further reveal neoliberal orientations. UNAM highlights attributes such as:

“... [an] entrepreneurial mindset; decision-making skills; creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship; critical thinking skills; problem-solving skills ... managing a business start-up; growing an entrepreneurial venture; marketing skills; managing people; record keeping; networking skills; time management skills; change management skills”. (UNAM, 2025)

Similarly, NUST presents its graduates as workers for “a modern, competitive society” prepared for “labour market demands” (NUST, 2024). National frameworks confirm this utilitarian vision. NDP6 sets a quantitative goal: “By 2030, Namibia has a robust education system, with tertiary education attainment increasing to 50 from 20 percent of employed persons in the economy” (Republic of Namibia, 2025).

Vision 2030 echoes this in economic terms: “There is decent work for all who are willing and able ... the workforce has access to and effectively utilises modern technology in production, marketing and communication” (Republic of Namibia, 2004).

These framings construct the graduate as a competitive, market-ready subject rather than a relational being accountable to community. Across curricula, language policies, assessment practices, ethical frameworks, and graduate

visions, Namibia’s education system reflects enduring colonial residues. Documents privilege Eurocentric and technocratic knowledge, entrench English as the sole medium of legitimacy, and construct graduates in neoliberal terms of employability and entrepreneurship. While rhetorical commitments to inclusivity and equity exist, they are rarely translated into practice. From a decolonial perspective, these findings expose the persistence of epistemic injustice and the colonality of knowledge. From an Ubuntu perspective, they reveal a failure to embed relational accountability, dignity, and communal flourishing at the heart of education. Together, they point to the urgent need for a reorientation that dismantles both external and internal colonialities and reconstitutes education around Ubuntu’s ethic of interdependence.

Discussion

The Namibian findings resonate with global debates on epistemic injustice and higher education decolonisation. Fricker’s (2007) concept of epistemic injustice provides a starting point: her account of testimonial and hermeneutical exclusion illuminates how indigenous knowledges are structurally marginalised when only Eurocentric paradigms are recognised as legitimate. The Namibian curricula analysed here exemplify this injustice, offering at best token

gestures to African perspectives while entrenching Western-derived frameworks as universal. Yet the case also extends Fricker's account. While Fricker foregrounds recognition, Ubuntu reframes epistemic justice in relational terms: to silence indigenous epistemologies is not only to exclude voices but to rupture relational accountability. As Ramose (2002) insists, Ubuntu is an onto-epistemology in which knowledge exists only in relation to others. The Namibian evidence suggests that epistemic injustice in African higher education cannot be fully understood without this relational dimension.

The findings also speak back to Santos's (2014) call for an ecology of knowledges. Santos argues that cognitive justice requires the co-presence of diverse epistemic traditions without reducing them to a hierarchy. Namibian policy frameworks, however, reveal the opposite tendency: they articulate an economy of knowledge structured around global competitiveness, with indigenous epistemologies treated as supplementary. Ubuntu pushes this argument further. Whereas the "ecology of knowledges" is framed largely in epistemological terms, Ubuntu insists that such plurality must also be grounded in an ethic of relational dignity. In other words, pluriversality without Ubuntu risks becoming a technical arrangement rather than an ethical project of human

flourishing. Similarly, the Namibian case complicates Mbembe's (2016) influential call to decolonise the university by dismantling Eurocentrism and creating "a pluriversity".

Mbembe foregrounds the need to provincialise Europe; the present findings show that decolonisation must also confront internal colonialities, including the neoliberalisation of graduate visions, the entrenchment of English, and the bureaucratic reproduction of elitism. These are not only direct legacies of European colonial rule, but practices sustained through postcolonial institutional formations and political economies. Ndlovu-Gatsheni's (2020) account of the "cognitive empire" captures this dynamic, and the Namibian case demonstrates its concrete manifestations: prospectuses that valorise entrepreneurship over solidarity, assessment models that individualise learning, and policies that privilege market efficiency over communal flourishing. Chilisa's (2012) work on indigenous research methodologies underscores the importance of epistemologies rooted in African worldviews. The absence of Ubuntu as a curricular framework in Namibia suggests that universities remain reluctant to take African philosophies seriously as foundations for knowledge production, reinforcing Chilisa's concern that decolonial rhetoric often fails to materialise in methodological or curricular practice.

Rather than offering additive curriculum adjustments, the findings point to four conceptual implications for theory and scholarship. First, curriculum decolonisation must move beyond additive models that merely insert African content into unchanged epistemic structures (Jansen, 2017). The Namibian evidence shows that rhetorical gestures toward African perspectives do little to challenge underlying hierarchies; curriculum transformation must therefore be reconceptualised as a structural reorientation toward pluriversality, ethically anchored in relational accountability. Second, language justice must be theorised as central to epistemic justice. The dominance of English is not simply technical; it is a profound site of epistemic exclusion. Deep decoloniality reveals its structural nature, while Ubuntu frames it as an ethical failure of recognition. Third, pedagogy and assessment must be understood as epistemic practices rather than neutral procedures. The persistence of grades-and-exams regimes reproduces competitive logics and isolation, echoing Freire's (1970/2007) critique of the banking model. Ubuntu reframes learning as dialogical and collective, while deep decoloniality situates assessment within relations of power. Fourth, graduate attributes and the telos of education must be rethought. Current employability discourse prioritises skills, innovation, and entrepreneurship

(Tomlinson, 2017); the Namibian prospectuses reflect this but neglect relational and ethical dimensions. Ubuntu reframes graduate formation around communal responsibility, while deep decoloniality critiques the neoliberalisation of higher education.

Although focused on Namibia, the findings carry broader implications. The reproduction of colonialities in postcolonial universities is a continental pattern, evident in South Africa's #RhodesMustFall movement, Kenya's struggles over language policy, and Ghana's curriculum reform debates. Underpinning these manifestations is a persistent economic structure of neo-colonial capitalism that frames educational priorities through market logic, valorising technical-managerial competence for its utility to the economy and disregarding education's intrinsic value for critical thought, ethical formation, and communal well-being. Namibia's case shows how internal colonialities, such as neoliberal graduate visions, are reinforced by external economic pressures that reduce education to a supplier of labour.

By foregrounding Ubuntu, however, Namibia's experience also offers a counter-narrative. It proposes a vision of education grounded not in market competitiveness but in relational flourishing, challenging the neo-colonial capitalist imperative.

This asserts the epistemic centrality of African philosophies in shaping pluriversal futures and disrupts the unidirectional flow of theory from the Global North by insisting that African philosophies can generate frameworks of global relevance. For this reason, the integration of Ubuntu and deep decoloniality constitutes more than an intellectual exercise; it is a transformative praxis. It is deconstructive in dismantling epistemic hierarchies, linguistic exclusions, and neoliberal logics, and reconstructive in building alternatives rooted in relational accountability, communal flourishing, and pluriversality. The remaining question, therefore, is how this praxis is operationalised at the level of institutional governance, ethics, and assessment.

Ubuntu as governance praxis

To move beyond critique, Ubuntu must be operationalised as an institutional governance praxis that reforms how decisions are made, who participates, and how accountability is structured. In hierarchical university systems, participation is often formal rather than substantive, with decision-making power concentrated in senior managerial tiers. An Ubuntu-inflected governance model begins from the premise that legitimacy is relational: leadership authority is ethically grounded in responsiveness to those

affected by decisions, especially students, early-career academics, professional staff, and historically marginalised communities. This shifts governance from compliance-based managerialism to relational accountability as an institutional norm.

Operationally, this reorientation can be instituted through three mechanisms. First, universities can establish deliberative structures that ensure meaningful representation and voice. This includes strengthening senate and faculty boards with protected seats for student representatives and junior academic staff, and creating deliberative forums where communities participate in defining institutional priorities, curriculum directions, and ethical codes. Such forums should not be advisory exercises but governance spaces with clear mandates, feedback loops, and binding procedural influence. Second, appointment and promotion procedures can be reformed to reduce elitist gatekeeping and network-based advantage. Ubuntu governance requires transparent criteria, publicly communicated selection processes, diverse appointment panels, and community-informed evaluation of leadership candidates, particularly for senior managerial positions. Third, accountability must be made downward as well as upward. Instead of relying exclusively on managerial

key performance indicators, Ubuntu governance supports accountability practices that include relational metrics such as responsiveness to student well-being; inclusivity in institutional culture and language access; and community engagement. These can be institutionalised through annual public accountability dialogues at faculty level, where leadership reports not only on outputs but also on relational responsibilities and redress.

These mechanisms are not administrative add-ons, but decolonial interventions into the coloniality of institutional power. They confront internal colonialities by democratising voice, reducing the reproduction of elitist hierarchies, and shifting the moral centre of institutional legitimacy toward dignity, inclusion, and communal flourishing.

Why liberal-universalist ethics are insufficient without Ubuntu

Policy and curriculum documents frequently articulate liberal-universalist values such as tolerance, democracy, equality, and integrity. While these values are ethically important, they can be structurally insufficient when framed primarily through individual rights and procedural fairness without relational accountability. The insufficiency arises because liberal ethics often presuppose

a subject whose moral obligations are grounded in autonomy, contract, and individual entitlement. In a neoliberalised higher education system, this ethical architecture can align with market rationalities: education becomes an individual investment, achievement becomes private capital, and “success” is measured through competitive distinction. In such settings, liberal values may remain rhetorical, while institutional practices reproduce exclusion through language hierarchies, technocratic governance, and merit regimes that ignore historical inequalities.

Ubuntu reframes ethics from the standpoint of relational obligation. Rather than asking only whether individuals have equal rights, Ubuntu asks whether institutional arrangements actively cultivate dignity, recognition, and belonging, and whether they repair historically produced harms. This is not a rejection of liberal values but a re-grounding of them: equality becomes relational recognition, democracy becomes participatory co-creation, and integrity becomes accountability to the communal consequences of institutional decisions. Deep decoloniality strengthens this move by revealing how apparently neutral ethical frameworks can become instruments of internal coloniality when they legitimise exclusionary standards in the name of universality. Ubuntu’s ethical contribution is therefore to

ensure that institutional ethics do not merely declare values but structurally organise relationships, responsibilities, and restorative commitments within the university.

Ubuntu-aligned pedagogy and assessment reform

A central finding of this study is that prevailing assessment regimes individualise learning and reproduce competitive achievement logics. Ubuntu-aligned reform requires more than rhetorical calls for student-centred learning; it requires pedagogy and assessment that institutionalise communal knowledge production and relational accountability. Such reform can be developed through three complementary innovations.

First, universities can integrate structured collaborative assessment that evaluates both knowledge outcomes and relational practices. Team-based inquiry projects can include explicit criteria for collective responsibility, dialogical participation, and the ethical handling of disagreement. To prevent free-riding and protect fairness, collaborative assessment can be paired with contribution logs, peer assessment protocols, and reflective accountability statements requiring students to narrate how knowledge was co-produced and how responsibilities were shared. Second, institutions can

adopt portfolio-based assessment that values learning as a developmental process rather than a single exam event. Portfolios can incorporate reflective writing, community-engaged outputs, iterative drafts, and evidence of responsiveness to feedback, aligning assessment with Ubuntu's ethic of growth-through-relation. Third, oral and dialogical assessment practices can be strengthened to recognise indigenous communicative traditions and reduce English-only epistemic gatekeeping. Dialogical examinations, viva-style conversations, and community panel assessments can legitimate oral reasoning, storytelling, and contextual knowledge as rigorous academic practice.

Pedagogically, these reforms imply a shift from transmissive instruction to dialogical co-creation. Ubuntu pedagogy treats the classroom as a relational community of inquiry where teaching authority is exercised through guidance and ethical responsibility rather than hierarchical domination. Deep decoloniality ensures that these reforms are pursued as structural alternatives that actively dismantle epistemic hierarchies. In combination, Ubuntu-aligned pedagogy and assessment can transform learning from an individualised credential process into a communal project of knowledge-making oriented toward shared flourishing.

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that Namibia's education system, despite decades of independence and policy commitments to transformation, continues to reproduce colonial and neoliberal logics. Curricula privilege Eurocentric knowledge systems; English remains entrenched as the medium of legitimacy; assessment models individualise learning; ethical frameworks are cast in liberal-democratic and technocratic terms; and graduate visions are oriented toward employability and entrepreneurship. Together, these patterns confirm that coloniality operates not only through external legacies but also through internal reproductions of exclusion, elitism, and neoliberal rationalities.

Engaging these findings with existing scholarship sharpens their significance. Fricker's (2007) notion of epistemic injustice explains how indigenous knowledges are structurally excluded from recognition, yet the Namibian case shows that injustice is also relational, rupturing the dignity and accountability that Ubuntu demands. Santos's (2014) ecology of knowledges calls for plurality, but without Ubuntu's ethical grounding such plurality risks being technical rather than transformative. Mbembe's (2016) call to provincialise Europe captures the necessity of dismantling Eurocentrism, while the Namibian evidence shows

that internal colonialities, neoliberal graduate visions, linguistic hierarchies, and technocratic logics are equally in need of dismantling. Chilisa's (2012) emphasis on indigenous epistemologies underscores the urgency of embedding African philosophies such as Ubuntu at the centre of curricula, not at their margins.

This study integrates Ubuntu and decoloniality into a composite framework, moving beyond their separate treatment in higher education literature. Ubuntu provides a normative orientation centred on relational accountability and dignity, while deep decoloniality supplies critical tools to examine external and internal colonial legacies. Their combined praxis is both deconstructive and reconstructive. Deconstructively, it exposes how Namibia's curricula, language policies, and graduate ideals perpetuate colonial logic under the guise of modernity and global competition. Reconstructively, Ubuntu offers an ethical foundation for education rooted in humanness (*botho*), dignity restoration, and interdependence. This integration advances three theoretical contributions: reframing epistemic justice as both structural and relational; deepening pluriversality by grounding it in relational ethics; and reorienting higher education's purpose from producing employable individuals to cultivating relational citizens committed to communal flourishing.

From these contributions flow conceptual implications for scholarship. Curriculum reform must be theorised not as additive but as structural transformation toward pluriversality. Language must be recognised as central to epistemic justice, with linguistic hierarchies treated as forms of coloniality. Pedagogy and assessment should be analysed as epistemic and ethical practices that can reproduce or disrupt alienating logics. Graduate attributes must be re-theorised to emphasise relational accountability and communal responsibility alongside technical competence. These are conceptual directions for research and theorisation, grounded in the Namibian evidence yet carrying broader significance.

The proposed transformation can be summarised in three institutional shifts. First, governance must move from hierarchical managerialism to participatory decision-making, transparent appointments, and downward accountability. Second, ethical reconstruction is needed to re-ground liberal-universalist values in Ubuntu's relational accountability, structuring institutional ethics around dignity, recognition, and restorative responsibility. Third, pedagogy and assessment should institutionalise communal knowledge production through collaborative inquiry, portfolio-based learning, and dialogical

assessment that values diverse epistemic traditions. The conclusion, then, is both sobering and hopeful. Sobering, because the colonialities entrenched in Namibia's education system remain powerful. Hopeful, because the tools for transformation, Ubuntu and deep decoloniality, are already available, waiting to be mobilised. The work ahead lies in making these resources not only philosophical commitments, but practical and scholarly realities.

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Epistemic Destruction and Indigenous Knowledge Loss During the OvaHerero/Nama Genocide (1904–1908): A Case study of OvaHerero Epistemicide

Kahuhu Alphons Koruhama & Joyce Muzengua

Introduction

Epistemicide and cultural erasure remain under-researched and unacknowledged. There is a lack of scholarship on the topic, and it remains a difficult yet necessary task to reconstruct the past using multiple research methods, particularly in the absence of comprehensive written records that reflect the views of indigenous populations. Genocide

encompasses more than just physical harm and loss of land, animals, and lives: it includes deep intellectual destruction, which endangers the ongoing transmission of culture and identity across generations. The OvaHerero indigenous knowledge system has been disrupted and altered through colonialism and genocide; OvaHerero social organisation, pastoral practices, spiritual systems,



One of the authors (Koruhama) during field work. Source: Kahuhu Alphons Koruhama

and ecological knowledge have all been eroded by colonial violence.

This article examines how indigenous knowledge systems and epistemologies were systematically destroyed in present-day Namibia following the OvaHerero genocide of 1904–1908, and explores both the breaks in cultural heritage caused by colonial erasure, and the enduring continuities that have defied it.

The article further explores dance and traditional cultural practices that may reclaim diminished knowledge systems. Through rhythm, movement, song, individual meetings and social gatherings, the OvaHerero dual-lineage system and traditional dances and cultural practices have shown how knowledge is embodied and lived. Cultural performances and traditional dances, such as *omuhiva*, *outjina*, and *ondjongo*, serve as sources of learning, resilience, and social cohesion.

The research upon which this case study is based employed qualitative oral histories, archival records, and existing scholarly works to recall the past. It was further informed by decolonial theory and indigenous ways of knowing.

Background

During the period of German colonial rule, between 1904 and

1908 the OvaHerero experienced the first genocide of the twenty-first century. This involved mass killings, concentration camps, the poisoning of water sources, and the driving of entire groups into the desert. Many studies on the genocide focus on the long-term socioeconomic consequences of forced labour, forced removal, forced relocations, murder, and land confiscation that the German government inflicted on the OvaHerero communities (Sarkin, 2008). Despite this, there is a lack of documentation on the disruption or forced relocation of indigenous knowledge systems, social structures, cultural memory, and land-based lifestyles.

Under the leadership of Samuel Maharero, the OvaHerero communities of German South-West Africa rebelled against the colonial German government in early 1904 (OvaHerero community recollection, personal communication, 2025). As recounted by OvaHerero community members (personal communication, 2025), the German government did not take this resistance lightly, as it resulted in OvaHerero victories at Okandjira and Oviuombo. In response, the German commander, Lothar von Trotha, launched a vicious campaign that resulted in the infamous extermination order of October 2, 1904, which claimed the lives of 80 percent of the OvaHerero. After being

driven into the Omaheke desert (the eastern extension of the Kalahari desert), thousands of OvaHerero died of starvation and thirst; survivors were imprisoned in concentration camps and forced to work (European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights [ECCHR], 2024). The extermination order also included systematic confiscation of livestock and ancestral lands, which led to the eradication of the indigenous knowledge system. According to the ECCHR (2024) report, the economic basis and cultural identity of the OvaHerero people have been destroyed by the land and livestock seizures. The German colonial government declared the land left over from the genocide as communal land and gave it to settlers, thus breaking the traditional ownership of the land.

According to triangulation of archival sources, oral histories, and ethnographic fieldwork from the OvaHerero communities in Namibia, Botswana, and Angola (OvaHerero community members, personal communication, 2025; Koruhama & Virere, 2024; Lynn, 2022), the intergenerational transmission of environmental knowledge, spiritual practices, language, and oral traditions was impaired by the genocide targeting mainly adult males, females, elderly people, and community leaders. These results support the idea that epistemic destruction often takes place in the

shadows of material dispossession and confirm Battiste's (2013) research on the loss of indigenous language and epistemology in colonial regimes.

According to field evidence, the OvaHerero language, songs, dances, and rituals have been eroded by colonial epistemic imposition and displacement. On the other hand, oral traditions, such as praise poetry, songs, and the *omuhiva* dance have served as living archives, preserving political consciousness and historical memory. *Omambo yeri koUno inga ngatwara omuatje waKamuatjimbonde*, for example, refers to the appeal sent



Field interview.

Source: Kahuhu Alphons Koruhama

to the United Nations by Chief Hosea Katjikururume Kutako in 1942.

By focusing on pastoralist epistemology, ecological knowledge-sharing practices such as *omuhiva*, and performance traditions that pass knowledge down from one generation to the next in Namibia, Botswana, and Angola, this paper fills some of the gaps in OvaHerero genocide studies. While attention has been given to these practices in the literature, there has been insufficient focus on their relationship to mortality rates, land theft, and economic impacts.

Methodology

The qualitative decolonial methodology applied for indigenous epistemology and community-based knowledge production is appropriate for analysing epistemic destruction during the OvaHerero genocide, as it focuses on indigenous knowledge and accounts for the historical power imbalances that shaped colonial knowledge formation. The data for this study were collected from three interlinked sources: (a) archival and documentary analysis of legal and historical records, such as Häussler (2021), the European Centre for Constitutional and Human Rights (2024), and Amnesty International (2025), providing a legal and historical context for indigenous knowledge of material dispossession, violence

and the structures of colonial rule; (b) indigenous media, biocultural knowledge and testimony; and (c) the authors' long-term involvement and relationship with OvaHerero traditional authority communities (Tuhiwai Smith, L. 2012; Weber & Weber, 2020). Their thematic and interpretative analysis was informed by the analyses of Lynn (2022) and Morgan (2010) of how the genocide has disrupted ecological knowledge, spiritual epistemology, and the mechanisms of knowledge transfer between generations. These relationships provided context-based understanding with an ethical basis and accountability for the holders of knowledge. This approach respects accepted ethical standards for indigenous and decolonial research, prioritising epistemic equity, reciprocity, and responsible use of cultural knowledge; rejects extractive research practices; respects indigenous sovereignty; and gives priority to indigenous voices (Tuck & Yang, 2012; Ndlovu & Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2024). Cultural expressions and oral histories are seen as common products rather than as appropriated data.

Results

Traditional dance and songs as epistemic resilience

Although almost 80 percent of the OvaHerero people were exterminated in the genocide, their cultural practices, such as social meetings, traditional

dances and their dual patrilineal and matrilineal systems, have left a legacy of resilience and memory (ECCHR, 2024; OvaHerero community members, personal communication, 2025). After genocide and dispossession, the OvaHerero people preserved their traditional knowledge in various epistemically resilient ways:

Memory encoding: The traditional OvaHerero dances, including *omuhiva*, *outjina* and *ondjongo*, the cultural tributes, and *ombimbi* (a traditional chant) are a means of conveying knowledge and a historical memory of migration, conflict, dispossession, and resistance. Even where there are few written records, the younger generations are using these platforms to learn about the past (OvaHerero community members, personal communication, 2025).

Knowledge transmission: The OvaHerero knowledge transmission was diverse in nature, with attributes of pastoral life being transferred during herding and pattern counting, while social relations, lineage, and moral codes were implicitly taught at fire gatherings at night, and also through the dancesong and traditional praises (OvaHerero community members, personal communication, 2025).

Identity reaffirmation: Oral histories show that the OvaHerero of

the nineteenth century wore similar garments and accessories, which became a fixture of everyday life and their cultural identity before the colonial era, and that today, many OvaHerero identify as OvaHimba, wear traditional animal skins, and use *otjize* (red ochre) and *omumbiri* (Commiphora resin) (OvaHerero community members, personal communication, 2025; Koruhama & Virere, 2024; Lynn, 2022). The OvaHerero soldiers removed clothes and uniforms from German soldiers they had defeated in battles during the German-OvaHerero War (1904–1908) and wore them as a symbol of victory. This enabled them to incorporate elements of the German military uniform into their own clothing (OvaHerero oral histories, field notes, 2025).

This becomes a practice of wearing the German uniform at memorial ceremonies such as *okuyambera* (a traditional commemoration) and other important social events such as weddings and funerals to teach younger generations the historical meaning of the dress, and to foster collective memory, resilience, and identity (OvaHerero oral histories, field notes, 2025; Koruhama & Virere, 2024). These military uniforms were later converted into what is now known as a traditional ceremonial OvaHerero dress. The result is that the seemingly colonial-style uniform is in fact a

symbol of OvaHerero bravery, survival, and resilience: a tangible record of past struggle, and a testament to how the tools of colonial domination can be transformed into timeless symbols of cultural resilience and national identity.

Land and ecology link

For the OvaHerero, the land serves as both a spiritual link with their ancestors and as an economic asset (OvaHerero community members, personal communication, 2025; Koruhama & Virere, 2024; Lynn, 2022). Consequently, their knowledge of ecological husbandry extends beyond grazing to include the protection and ritual maintenance of sacred sites and places. An example of this epistemic knowledge is the ability to predict weather patterns and the future of societies.

Colonial erasure and knowledge disruption: Land expropriation, which entails the loss of spiritual and cultural identity of the OvaHerero, has clearly influenced the colonial project in Namibia (Morgan, 2010). Forced labour quite literally involved the removal and separation of families, the destruction of the two-parent system, cultural assimilation, and institutionalisation. Since cattle are essential for OvaHerero customs and rituals such as marriage, naming of children, and burials, the extermination order and confiscation

of livestock was really a confiscation of rich cultural practices. Thus, indigenous knowledge systems, pastoral lifelines, continuity of social institutions, and the transmission of knowledge between generations were all disrupted by internment and labour camps for survivors. Epistemic violence worked in interconnected ways, as outlined below:

- **Dispossession of land and livestock:** The living context of the OvaHerero people has disappeared, leaving them without land and livestock, and their identity, grazing, mobility, and pastoralist ecological and traditional knowledge have been severely eroded (OvaHerero community members, personal communication, 2025).
- **Disruption of social institutions and eldernetworks:** Mentors and community leaders, including chiefs, elders, lineal priests, and social groups, who passed on knowledge were killed, displaced, or rendered powerless (OvaHerero community members, personal communication, 2025).
- **Forced labour and internment:** Survivors were deprived of the freedom to practice or to impart knowledge because they were prisoners of war, and forced to work or interned in

camps far from their homes and villages (OvaHerero community members, personal communication, 2025).

- **Cultural suppression and linguistic loss:** Some OvaHerero communities (particularly those displaced to parts of Botswana and South Africa) experienced a loss of language fluency, cultural expression, and knowledge transmission during and after the genocide, as evidenced by the oral histories of OvaHerero communities.

According to linguistic scholars who study the threats to language and colonial epistemicide, this distortion is central to the larger project of colonial domination. Loss of language prevents the transmission of cultural memory, environmental knowledge, ritual practices, and cosmology between generations, which are all carried out by native language and performance (Battiste, 2013; Hinton & Hale, 2001). Battiste (2013), for example, argues that colonial education and missionary efforts systematically replaced native languages with colonial ones and social structures that maintain traditional knowledge.

According to Nabokov (2002), native languages serve as both communication tools and repositories of epistemic frameworks, which are

ways of classifying the world and establishing relations between time, place, and community. The OvaHerero interpret the disappearance of Otjiherero songs and ritual dances as signalling the disappearance of multimodal knowledge systems documenting ecological practices, historical memory, and social norms. Anthropological research on displaced pastoralist communities shows that traditional forms of learning, such as group storytelling, ritual reciprocity, and elder-assisted learning, are hampered by forced migration and the fragmentation of social networks.

To place the experience of the OvaHerero refugees in the larger pattern of colonial linguistic disruption and epistemic marginalisation in both the African and indigenous contexts—which has led to the loss of not only linguistic diversity, but also the cultures of knowledge and existence that have sustained these communities for centuries—this study integrates the oral testimonies.

Trauma and epistemic discontinuity: The extent of the trauma caused by rape and murder, and even the skinning of family members' skulls, disrupted social formation, memory, and heritage, resulting in intergenerational harm. An epistemic catastrophe resulted from the aftermath, including the loss of identity, methods of know-

ing, living, sharing knowledge, and remembering. These can be seen in Namibia's divided OvaHerero society today (OvaHerero community members, personal communication, 2025).

Community-based and intergenerational education: The way people live together in OvaHerero culture, along with their educational system that puts the community first and includes experienced older people, wise individuals, talented traditional musicians, singers of celebratory songs, dancers, and farming experts, collectively created a hands-on place for sharing information. This is now facing challenges, however, threatening the link between long-standing educational practices and modern lifestyles (OvaHerero community members, personal communication, 2025).

Restorative epistemic justice: Negotiating reparative justice following genocide should encompass more than just giving back land and money; it should also focus on bringing back the knowledge systems of the original people, which involves returning cultural items, writing down songs and dances, helping community archives, and acknowledging the loss of understanding that occurred (OvaHerero community members, personal communication, 2025; Forensic Architecture, 2025).

Decolonising pedagogies: The Namibian educational system must be inclusive, and introduce the OvaHerero genocide and indigenous knowledge systems in the national curricula (OvaHerero community members, personal communication, 2025). This would challenge the dominance of Eurocentric epistemologies and foreground indigenous worldviews, languages, landrelations, and knowledge practices in the educational systems.

Discussion

The OvaHerero genocide was an attack not only on the knowledge systems, cultural memory, and conceptual frameworks within which communities understood the world and themselves, but also on bodies and possessions. We have shown that genocide reporting cannot be limited to accounts of death, land seizures, and physical violence. Instead, the loss of land, livestock, elders, institutions, and social networks led to permanent disruption of the indigenous system of knowledge and highlighted epistemic violence as a major, but little-known aspect of the genocide.

Colonial violence included methods that, in addition to physical violence, methodically destroyed indigenous epistemologies by devaluing language, disrupting traditional education, and marginalising indigenous modes of

knowledge. Settler colonialism has been shown to disrupt indigenous education and knowledge transfer systems, resulting in the loss of the family ties, cultural teachings, and cosmological understanding that shape people's relationship to their land and to each other.

The idea of epistemic violence can be used to understand how these processes operate. It is believed that dominant structures delegitimise local knowledge as inferior or “uncivilised”, silence indigenous voices, and erase indigenous knowledge systems in favour of colonial epistemologies that are presumed to be superior and universal. This results in a lack of cognitive resources that marginalises indigenous understanding of history, ecology, and society, making it more difficult for communities to express their experiences or reclaim their traditions on their own terms.

The OvaHerero displaced to Botswana, South Africa and elsewhere, unable to speak Otjiherero fluently or perform rituals or traditional dances, are examples of the dismantling of the epistemic structures that had been passed down from generation to generation, not as an integral part of life, but as a place of learning and reaffirmation of ecological knowledge, social commitments, and spiritual values.

Similarly, other research on epistemic marginalisation among other indigenous groups has shown that cultural agency, identity affirmation, and worldviews are lost when colonial systems devalue local languages and epistemology through formal education or social coercion. This reduces the ability to manage local ecosystems sustainably and to preserve the collective memory of past injustices. In this way, the OvaHerero genocide narrative as epistemic erasure highlights the colonial epistemic dominance that still exists in post-independence Namibia, where the preference for Western histories and forms of knowledge is still reflected in official education, memorial services, and national narratives.

An analysis of land loss and physical destruction should not be replaced by the identification of epistemic violence as part of a genocidal process. This perspective is consistent with research on decolonisation and indigenous epistemology, which stresses the need for both epistemic, and material and legal compensation to respect, recognise, and restore indigenous knowledge systems. This article argues that the disruption of the cognitive and cultural frameworks that underpin the ability of a people to know, to be, and to pass on meaning from one generation to the next is a more accurate indicator of genocide than the loss of life or land.

By linking the physical and epistemic aspects of genocide, it offers a new analytical perspective for genocide studies and Namibian history.

Conclusion

The genocide against the OvaHerero must be interpreted both literally and figuratively. This supposes a redefinition of genocide that includes an assault on forms of knowledge, identity, and memory, rather than just on bodies and land. The long-term effects of the genocide go beyond losing people and land, and include the loss of indigenous peoples' understanding of the world, and how they connect with the land. More than just the seizure of land and animals, the extensive slaughter of men, women, and children was also part of a deliberate effort to eliminate indigenous knowledge, including the land-centred, pastoral, family-oriented, environmental, and performance-based wisdom that supported generations of OvaHerero. This has led to a sense of disconnection from that heritage for the OvaHerero in Botswana and South Africa.

The Ovaherero have demonstrated epistemic resilience, gleaned from their sense of pride and continued cultural rituals. However, there is a need to acknowledge the effects of epistemic violence on indigenous knowledge systems. Reparations and restorative justice must include

support for community-managed projects that record and research indigenous knowledge to obtain epistemic justice and to restore lost knowledge to be preserved for future generations. The OvaHerero genocide must be interpreted both literally and figuratively. This suggests that the assault on forms of knowledge, identity, and memory should be part of the definition of genocide, beyond the bodies and land.

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Epistemological Access at the Institutions of Teacher Education

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Abstract:

Constructivist epistemology has been adopted to underpin the Namibian education system at all levels of schooling since independence in 1990. This article explores how constructivist pedagogy is accessed and applied in teacher education by locating the understanding and position accorded to it in informing teaching-learning, and the resource grounds committed to enable its application.

Drawing on English language education students' lived academic experiences of its implementation, the study used a qualitative case study through interviews in order to determine its accessibility.

Bernstein's theory of pedagogical discourse and practice offered a framework for analysing the application and outcomes of the study. At the



Namibia adopted learner-centred education after Independence. This photo was taken at the Otjivero Primary School. Source: Dirk Haarmann

description level, the study unearthed a move towards constructivist learning and its basic perspectives, through which individual students could be said to be better grounded in it by becoming active participants in the instructional process. There appeared to be weakly framed rules over selection, sequence, pace and evaluative criteria which could be understood to be placing students on centre stage, and signified educators as learning mediators. Contrary to that, the implementation level turned didactical practices into educator-centeredness, dislodging students from the centre of education to the edge, where passivity and behaviourism are perpetuated. While this could be interpreted as displaying teacher educators' empowerment in the pedagogical encounter, they too are incapacitated in terms of instructional methods aligned with constructivism.

While there appears to be a high level of student enrolment, and therefore a high level of physical access to education, the study found epistemological access to be less prioritised, or not explicitly advocated. This was further constrained by the contextual factors not being made into the enabling grounds that are necessary for epistemology's effective application. As implied, a need exists to reconsider the state of theorising within teacher education and revamp the current position through concerted efforts to address the constraining contexts impacting accessibility.

Keywords: constructivism, epistemology, epistemological access, formal access, social justice education, classification, framing

Introduction

Tapping into the academic experiences and views of student teachers at a teacher education campus of the University of Namibia (UNAM) in 2023, the study explores the state of the constructivist epistemology and how it is accessed (or not). An epistemology always plays a pivotal role in any teacher education programme, informing, amongst others, the knowledge perspectives prospective teachers should be equipped with, and the teaching methods necessary to facilitate teaching-learning, as well as the assessment approaches for judging the exit learning outcomes. Thus, epistemology is a fundamental belief system upon which decisions of educational significance are centred; it further sheds light on the education that is envisioned, particularly the desirable competencies for preparing future teachers, and the kind of citizenry or labour force a country wishes to have for its future in the quest for meeting socioeconomic development goals.

As countries worldwide have adopted particular epistemologies to underlie their educational systems, likewise Namibia at independence, as a part of her education reform

process, embraced constructivism popularly referred to as learner-centred education (LCE) to underpin educational practices (Ministry of Education & Culture [MEC], 1993). LCE was first initiated at the former colleges of education which in early 2011 were merged with the University of Namibia (UNAM). Since then, how constructivist education has fared requires our closer attention as little or no research has been conducted into this issue. Are students continuing to be trained with the underlying epistemology and equipped to apply it after graduation? Or broadly, is constructivism accessible as a pedagogical approach for preparing prospective teachers for classroom teaching?

This investigation is appropriate in the realm of education for social justice. In the context of educational reform, constructivism has been focused on attaining the goals of education for all: access, equity, quality and democracy (MEC, 1993). Similarly, the field of social justice education is aligned with similar issues, such as pursuing the full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs (Bell, 1997; Picower, 2012). Social justice education envisions a just society that features the equal distribution of resources and opportunities, and in which all members are physically and

psychologically safe and secure (ibid.) consistent with the goals of education for all. In school, social justice education implies delivering education that enables students to develop their full potentials and capacities and to capably interact with others (Bell, 1997). Social justice education seems directly related to a critical version of constructivism that probes the issues of equity, access, power, inclusivity, participation, liberation and empowerment, and would hastily critique how students are taught, including the issue of a curriculum philosophy's relevance and application (Picower, 2012; Bell, 1997). These are examined since their practices can be oppressive (restrictive), particularly within a belief that "practice is always shaped by theory, whether formal or informal, tacit or expressed. ... Theory and practice are intertwining parts of the interactive and historical process" (Bell, 1997, p.4). Hence, this article is designed to unearth the interrelated issues of programme epistemology, the position accorded to it to steer educational practices, and the degree to which it is accessed or not.

Epistemology and the concept of educational access

Epistemology, in the study of educational philosophy, deals with the nature, origin and human limits of knowing, and raises questions of

knowledge development. It is often regarded as *the theory of knowledge* for its focus on this very endeavour (Cobern, 1993, p.2). As stated above, it serves as a fundamental belief system upon which instructional practices and decisions are based. The teachers' theoretical views about how students learn would influence how they would teach, i.e., the methodological choices (Prawat 1992). The adopted epistemology impacts interrelated aspects such as the essence of quality education in the country's education sector and its objectives; the teaching approaches necessary to mediate the envisioned education; and the positions and roles various education partners assume in the education context and the social relationships to prevail amongst them. Epistemology further suggests the sort of educational leadership to be exercised to enhance envisaged learning, and what assessment orientation to adopt to determine the achievement of learning outcomes. An education system and its curricula are considered effective if their epistemological base is accessed, i.e., if students are fully acquainted with its theoretical knowledge and practices.

Conversely, access to an epistemology can be sensed in the teaching-learning process by viewing the perspectives or outcomes advocated and practiced. In Namibia, the goal of access implies according all students equal

opportunities to succeed by expanding and availing sufficient resources, facilities and amenities necessary for their academic growth and development. It bears a commitment to equitably provide quality education to all, regardless of their background or cognitive ability, and to undo the social inequality and imbalances of the colonial past (MEC, 1993). This addresses students' constitutional rights to education and is found to gain momentum with the formulation and embracing of the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals, with specific reference to universal primary education or universal basic education (Nakabugo, 2008; Vavrus et al., 2011).

There are two dimensions of access: formal and epistemological. Formal access can be attained by increasing the number of the educational institutions to ensure there are enough classrooms to accommodate most students. The institutions are located where they are most needed and are adequately stocked with resources and facilities, with sufficient qualified teachers being produced to staff them (MEC, 1993). In this regard, access outwardly seeks to ensure that basic schools are staffed by well-grounded teachers who are able to carry out the entrusted tasks, so that quality education is delivered. Hence, the access goal is intertwined with pursuing quality education delivery, since competent professional teachers,

armed with adequate educational resources, are expected to carry out effective teaching. This demonstrates the physical dimension of access that ensures that a higher proportion of the student population is enrolled in the schools and is satisfied by meeting the resource needs of the institutions (Morrow, 2007).

At the second level, access to education “means more than simply physical access to schooling or placing more learners into schools” (Nyambe, 2008, p.24). This leads to the second meaning and dimension of access, namely epistemological access, which is present when the curriculum and its educational objectives in practice, rather than in theory, are attained, or the intended learning is practically accessible. Epistemological access is about “the concept of teaching” or “the expected education” (Morrow, 2007, p.18, 19) and is oftentimes denoted as theoretical or philosophical access. This access underlies what the institutions of learning are concerned with: “it is the business of the institutions of learning and teaching ... it is what the game is about” (Morrow, 2007, p.2). And thus, teaching must be seen as a practice of enabling epistemological access (Morrow, 2007, p.2).

In a university setting, epistemological access is the kind of access preoccupied with equipping students with the

kinds of things universities teach and distribute, both theoretically and practically. The *Towards Education for All* policy (MEC, 1993, p. 34) states: “We must also acknowledge schools themselves can be barriers to learning. Rote memorisation and repetition can stifle curiosity.” Thus, an inquiry into epistemological access to education assesses if the teaching practices in question enabled the expected learning, including the interpretation of quality education (Vavrus et al., 2011). In the context of this study, it means whether constructivism actually occurs.

According to Morrow (2007), the two dimensions are intertwined, and impact each other. An achievement in formal access can influence attainment at the level of epistemological access. A well-resourced setting tends to offer teaching that corresponds with an informing theory, which can lead to the successful attainment of the curriculum, and fosters sufficient epistemological accessibility. However, a non-conducive environment with meagre resources, large class sizes and a high student-to-teacher ratio leads to inferior education. In the context of higher education, the provision of quality education is sacrificed if classes are too large, resulting in standards being lowered. Thus, the two forms of access can be “in direct conflict with each other, [since] the more we satisfy the former, the less we can satisfy the

latter ... to pursue the former is to betray the latter” (Morrow, 2007, p.19). This situation arises when governments become more concerned with and committed to physical access to schooling, while insufficient attention is paid to whether the expected education actually occurs.

The epistemological perspectives of constructivist education

Derived from the works of educational psychologists and theorists such as John Dewey, Jean Piaget and Levy Vygotsky, constructivist learning is, firstly, an active process in which students learn by constructing new ideas and building new schemas based upon their background knowledge and life experiences (Vavrus et al., 2011). Learning is impacted by the cultural, economic and social contexts of the learner’s lives, and plays a vital role in dictating the sorts of information students learn and the cognitive processes they use to build and use schemas (Cobern, 1993; Windschitl, 1999; Pagan, 2006).

The contextual elements thus serve as the point of departure into new learning. The process features closer social collaboration, cooperation, interchange and reflection, and as students interact with one another and with teachers, they develop new ideas, creating a universe of discourse,

a common frame of reference in which communication takes place (Cobern, 1993, Windschitl, 1999). “Students are knowing beings who construct knowledge that is personally meaningful as opposed to the empty containers to be filled with knowledge constructed by others” (Cobern, 1993, p.2). Learning involves mediating conceptual understanding and the creation of meaning from multiple schools of thoughts and perspectives (Windschitl, 1999).

Secondly, constructivism places students at the centre of education where they assume a much more active role. This perspective posits a high student activity level, and corresponding instructional methods should reflect this level (Pagan, 2006). It calls for active participation, deeper engagement, and discussion amongst learners over issues arising from the lesson. Pagan (2006) alluded to serious class discussions that involve students talking about the subject and arriving at their own conclusions. The responses do not matter as much as the ways in which they arrived at and defended. The discussions, as an engagement effort, should promote deep and scientific reasoning rather than a simple, mundane exchange between the educators and students. Herein students recognise problems, formulate hypotheses, construct mental models, research and test their hypothesis, adjust their

mental models and reach conclusions with minimal guidance from educators. The application and synthesis, problem solving, analytical and critical-independent reasoning, student argumentation and evaluation are the skills nourished. The implied skills symbolise the meaning of the quality education and its standards that the country seeks in its education system (Vavrus et al., 2011). Placing students at the centre of education demands a lot more from the educator, beyond integrating their prior knowledge and life experience into the curriculum. It suggests considering their intellectual abilities, needs and interests to determine content, organisation and progression of the teaching-learning processes in contrast to teaching predetermined by the requirements of syllabus/curriculum and performance in examinations (MEC, 1993).

Thirdly, the educator is a mediator of learning who acts at the interface between curriculum and students to bring the two together in a way that is meaningful for the students (Cobern, 1993). An educator creates appropriate conditions that are indispensable for learning facilitation, and is regarded as an enabler or a scaffolder who provides leadership that assists students to develop effective course goals and work together to accomplish them (Pagan, 2006). The educator keeps students on track,

guiding and monitoring them towards the accomplishment of course goals. The educator thus selects instructional approaches and strategies that are in line with the pedagogy's viewpoints. Furthermore, constructivism calls for a flexible educator with adequate subject content knowledge, and understanding of and familiarity with the principles underlying the topics of study, and the variety of ways in which these principles can be explored. There is thus a greater demand on teachers' pedagogical skills. Windschitl (1999) uses terminology such as 'scaffolding', 'modelling', 'coaching', 'guiding' and 'advising' to describe an educator's range of instructional skills.

Fourthly, since assessment is integrated within the teaching-learning process, it plays a new role that is different from that played in traditional, behaviouristically informed education. Constructivism advocates diverse types and tools of assessment that allow students to demonstrate what they know, and that connect with rigorous criteria of excellence (Windschitl, 1999). The sets of criteria are negotiated and agreed upon with the students for them to understand the purposes of learning. Students produce journals, research reports, physical models or performance in the forms of plays, debates, dances or other artistic representations (Windschitl, 1999). The assessment is grounded in the conceptual framework

that *assessment and instruction are inseparable* (Gipps, 1996; Shepard, 2000; Wilmot, 2001), and its activities reflect the expected processes and abilities: “Good assessment models the real learning activities that we wish students to engage with and [the] teacher to teach” (Gipps, 1996, p.11). Hence being integrated with instruction, assessment is “moved into the middle of the teaching and learning process instead of being postponed as only the end-point of instruction” (Shepard, 2000, p.10).

Lastly, assessment pursues *higher order skills* or *higher-level activities*, and the emphasis is on devising more open-ended performance activities that challenge students to reason critically, to solve complex problems, and to apply their knowledge in real-world contexts (MEC, 1993; Gipps, 1996; Shepard, 2000). These norms/values are antithetical to the externally set examination practices as the only measure of student progress, and are distant from the traditional assessment practices linked to the recall of disconnected bits of information or rote learning which enforces *shallow learning*, instead of *deep learning* (Gipps, 1996).

The foregoing are thus some of the key principles of constructivist epistemology, and are crucial in analysing how it is practiced in the classroom.

Research methodology

An interpretive worldview was selected to lead the study. It is defined as “systematic analysis of socially meaningful action through the direct detailed observation of people in natural settings in order to arrive at understandings and interpretations of how people create and maintain their social worlds” (Neuman, 2011, pp. 101–102). This worldview attempts to establish an empathetic understanding of the everyday lived experiences of people in specific historical settings (Neuman, 2011). The social human action is studied since it reveals personal motives that shape a person’s internal feelings and guide decisions to act in particular ways (Neuman, 2011). It is further based on the view that the only way to understand social reality is from the perspectives of those enmeshed within it; hence understanding is inseparable from the human condition (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). Interpretivism asserts *understanding, interpretation* and *social meaning*, in that meaning is constructed via the interaction between humans, or between humans and objects (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011).

We then viewed the subjective meanings and understandings students constructed and assigned them to the implementation of an epistemology based on their personal academic experiences using interactive semi-

structured face-to-face interviews. These tools constituted the means by which we immersed ourselves in the field of objects and participants.

A case study typology was selected as an appropriate choice for this research, for it is naturally linked to the interpretive worldview concerning establishing meaning and understanding of the situation. A case study is an inquiry that investigates the singular, the particular and the unique contemporary phenomenon (Rule & John, 2015, p.3). It seeks an in-depth analysis of a contemporary real-life problem bounded by specific contexts of time and place from multiple sources of data, using a variety of methods to arrive at a rich description and the complexities surrounding it (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). Its findings may not be generalised to other situations unless they share close characteristics. However, on the view that the particular encapsulates the universal, the particularity of the case has the potential to reveal a universal truth: the *One* is present in the *one*, and may be recognised through careful and sensitive research that can reveal essential truths about the human condition (Rule & John, 2015). Thus, according to Rule and John (2015, p. 3) an epistemology of generating universal truths and insights from the particular arises from the ontology of a case study. Therefore, while the case is a study of particularisation more than

generalisation, it has the potential to produce exemplary knowledge which requires the exercise of contextual discernment as to its local applicability (Rule & John, 2015). Embracing this stance, this study's findings will have the potential to reflect what may also exist at other teacher education institutions, and not only what transpires in the researched setting.

Bernstein's Theory of Pedagogical Discourse and Practice: An Analytical Framework for Curriculum Application

Basil Bernstein's theory of pedagogical discourse and practices dwells on how curriculum knowledge is transmitted by viewing the dynamics of its various curricular contents and student-teacher relationships, using the concepts of classification and framing. Classification is the degree of boundaries among different subject areas of knowledge within a curriculum. A strong classification suggests clear or rigid boundaries between subjects, whereas a weak classification presents blurred or integrated boundaries. A strong classification is evident in a traditional curriculum where subjects are taught in isolation, while a weak classification appears in a more interdisciplinary approach, where subjects are integrated.

Contrarily, framing is concerned with the transmission of curriculum

knowledge through pedagogical practices (Hoadley, 2012). Thus, in the schooling context, framing refers to the degree of control teachers and students exercise over the selection, sequencing, pacing, evaluative criteria and hierarchical rules of the knowledge transferred and received in the pedagogical relationship (ibid.). A strong framing implies a higher degree of control exerted by the teacher, while a weak framing implies more student freedom and choice over what is learned. On the accounts of Hoadley (2012) and Bernstein (1996), *selection* entails deciding on valid knowledge to be taught; who selects the learning contents, which contents are selected and in whose interests. Relatedly, *sequence* is deciding about the organisation in which knowledge is presented and the logic behind such order. *Pacing* is the rate of expected acquisition of learning and who decides it. The *evaluation* involves deciding what counts as relevant knowledge and is sought through assessment. The *hierarchical rules* pinpoint to the kind of social relations maintained in the classroom between teacher and students regarding control and authority (Bernstein, 1996). Is the teacher more dominant, more controlling and authoritarian, or do the students interact more freely and relate more personally to the teacher? A strong framing indicates a dominant teacher who asserts more control and authoritarian rule over the learning

aspects, whereas a weak framing signifies greater student freedom, rights and flexibility. A weakly framed pedagogy corresponds with an integrated type of curriculum (a constructivist one), while a strong one with a collection curriculum corresponds with a behaviourist one.

The classification and framing rules can be *visible* or *invisible*. *Visible* indicates strong classification and strong framing, whereas *invisible* implies weak classification and weak framing. The rules also point to whether the curriculum is a *collection* or *integrated*, with each fostering a different kind of classification and framing regarding organisation and transmission of learning (Bernstein, 1996; Hoadley, 2012). A collection curriculum's contents stand in a *closed relation* to one another, being clearly bounded, and lean towards maximal teacher control (Bernstein, 2002), and thus being teacher-centred. Teaching tends to be rigid, differentiating and hierarchical in character, and within prescribed limits, the teacher can go their own way, relying on stricter teacher authority and control. This curriculum type is also examination-driven, with stress on a strong mastery of content, and is fixed in terms of interpretation and delivery (Bernstein, 2002).

The contents of the *integrated curriculum* stand in an *open relation* to

one another. It is un-fixed in terms of timeframe and contents, and various content units are all-encompassing and subordinate to some ideas that reduce their isolation. The relation of different set of contents is also informed by more general principles rather than principles drawn from the particular subjects being taught (Bernstein, 2002). It is likely to bring about a pedagogy that emphasises *ways of knowing* rather than *states of knowledge*. The integrated curriculum resonates with a constructivism that enhances reasoning and reinforces cooperative kinds of teaching and interactive “horizontal relationships” between educators and students (Bernstein, 2002, p. 104; Hoadley, 2012). In terms of authority and control, it fosters students’ status, freedom and rights in learning, offering a considerable degree of flexibility, and responds to their emerging educational needs.

This framework was used to examine a number of aspects relating to epistemology and its perspectives: what occupies the centre of education; the student-educator interactions; whether how the epistemology is practised suggests an open or closed system or fixed agenda views of curriculum, and if the nature of learning is cyclical, with intersecting foci and related webs of multiple meanings that enable students to explore the myriad of connections (Prawat, 1992; Doll, 1993). It also examines whether educators structure

the instructional discourses in an interactive approach in which planning is a conjoint activity between them and the students, and how educators have been responsive to the students’ search for meaning (Doll, 1993). It looks at whether planning of learning is developmental, taking advantage of the unexpected and geared towards the need for individuality, or if the curriculum has become solely pre-determined, pre-planned, pre-defined, fostering reductionist learning (Cornbleth, 1987).

The State of a Constructivist Learning in Theory and Practice: The Findings

Interviews with 11 students were used to generate data. The interview questions were divided into four categories: questions requiring students to identify a particular epistemology advocated in their training; their understanding of the epistemology and its meaning; the instructional methods used to mediate learning, including assessment approaches used and modelled into them; and educational resources availed for their learning. The responses to the questions would subsequently assist in locating an epistemology underlying the programme, the grounds established to enable its application; the status/priority accorded it in informing practices, and the kind of access suggested.

The pedagogy of education in teacher education

Students were requested to indicate the official theory advocated and informing their learning of the English modules over their four-year stay at the campus, and which must be applied in Namibian schools. The individual students cited divergent theories, rather than a single, common theory. There were those who made passing reference to LCE or constructivism, but some seemed to confuse LCE with other educational philosophies they had encountered, such as positivism, idealism, cognitivism, pragmatism and thematic approach as the pedagogies guiding the teaching of the English curriculum. Others mentioned LCE as teaching based on subject-syllabus content and objectives or prediction. Thus, some students faced a challenge in distinguishing LCE/constructivism from the educational philosophies mentioned above. Others claimed LCE and TCE (teacher-centred education) to be the legitimate approaches.

At an individual level, students failed to offer a full description of what LCE is, providing only the little gist of it. Regardless of the theory, however, each student responded, and even when they misunderstood LCE, when probed and prompted further, despite some answers missing the point, most tended to suggest at least an unstable grip of perspectives closely corresponding

with a social constructivist approach. But as indicated, this came about when the students were prompted, and not all students could immediately describe the elements of LCE. Students appeared to possess general knowledge and an understanding, though unstable, of LCE/constructivism at an elementary level, suggesting the potential for growth and further development. Students also appeared to have LCE backgrounds from their high schools, but could not relate much of it from the education reform process context in which it has been embedded. They also indicated that they were not directly taught about LCE, but had touched on some of its points in their education journeys. Therefore, regardless of the pedagogy each student initially mentioned, when probed further their answers would reference LCE, though with little detail, suggesting a narrow or shallow level of understanding. This tends to suggest that constructivism has not been unequivocally advocated or embraced.

Students' understanding of an informing LCE epistemology

The second set of questions looked into students' conceptual understanding of LCE through their descriptions of its basic tenets. In summary, they described LCE as an approach in which learners "must be considered not as empty vessels ...

but as people with minds, people who can think”. LCE takes place when “the learners are the most participating in the discussions, participating in the classroom activities ... being at the centre of learning”.

[Learners are] the ones spearheading the process instead of the teacher telling them what to do. They are prompted by themselves, have courage to do things by themselves and then the teacher comes in to correct a few things here and there but not from the point of reprimanding when telling what you did here is wrong. ...is when they take charge of their own learning. (Informant A)

Informant A described LCE as a theory that recognises learners’ knowledge and understanding acquired prior to entering school, and continued:

... Learners are responsible for their own learning and ... ask questions, ... predict about the things ... a teacher is the facilitator, [who] encourages learners to engage in collaborative activities, to help one another, give own ideas, work in pairs/groups to their own knowledge ... [a teacher] gives knowledge to the learners.

According to Informant B, learners are the ones who are supposed to be

learning, and not the teacher: “The teacher facilitates, learners learn more when they are involved instead of when just told what to do.”

[LCE takes] the needs of learners into consideration and ... knowledge background and ... making the learners to collaborate with each other during the lessons. ... Those techniques that are used for learning should consider what learners know and not what they do not know ... Assessment that they are setting should include ... what learners know in the lessons. (Informant C)

[LCE is] the learning that takes place in class ... mostly based on learners ... learners are at the centre of learning. And this actually means that learners are free to express their feelings in the classroom ... give their opinions on certain topics ... And their learning would become more easy... and fun to them ... They would be taking place in the learning process rather than the teacher going in front of the class and teach. (Informant D)

[LCE is] education ... based on what learners know from the environment where learners are growing. They have to know those things. When you are teaching, you have to come up with the priorities of the learners. What is that learners really know?

...You have to look at their ages. Whatever you have to teach, you have to make sure that it is based on the learners. You cannot teach someone the things like at the university but you are teaching it like at the primary school level. So, you have to look at the ages of the learners and ... use materials that are appropriate. ...you also have to move from the simple method or what the learners know to the more difficult... Look at what the learners know to some of the things for the learners, from the simple ways to the more difficult. You have also to look at the culture ... because sometimes you cannot just do whatever since you are working with the learners and maybe somewhere somehow you are devaluating or devaluing their culture. So, you have to learn their culture first, when you are teaching them you are working hand in hand with their culture. (Informant E)

One of the things that differentiates pragmatism from others like teacher-centred education is that pragmatism involves all aspects like learners and teachers. It involves them together whereby the teacher and learners have to interact with one another. ...learn from one another ... do things together. That differentiates pragmatism. It is mostly different from other theories of education because there

is learning together of teachers and learners. (Informant F)

But why was the theory introduced?

[Theory] was introduced to help learners to participate in the teaching and learning process, not only the teacher, to participate in the activities, to indicate their prior knowledge of the content they have been taught and to express their feelings on how they are being taught in the class and to let [them] acquire basic skills. (Informant E)

The students' responses cumulatively defined LCE/constructivism in terms of participation, collaboration, and free expressions in which learners and their needs are at the centre of education. Learners are valued as opposed to empty containers, studying and being responsible for their own learning, with their prior learning and background knowledge being points of departure into new learning. They emphasised the transition from the known to the unknown, and the importance of encouragement to enquire and consideration being given to the ages and cultures of learners. The teacher is seen as a facilitator who uses assessment that enhances positive achievement and group knowledge, and who understands group/pair work as being an instructional method for facilitating interactive learning. Their descriptions are consistent with

an LCE-based understanding of the roles of students and teachers, which is very positive indication. The responses exclude the views such as learning with understanding and meaning making, problem solving and critical reasoning, reflection, student-teacher relations in the power-control context, and less touched-upon issues. Overall, the answers illustrate that students have fair, if incomplete, general knowledge and understanding of the informing LCE epistemology that forms a basis for further development.

Lesson facilitation: Teaching methods and strategies modelled

The next category of questions solicited views based on their observations on the instructional methods and strategies educators use to facilitate learning. Whenever asked to mention the general teaching methods that they were taught, students often appeared to be hesitant and uncertain. The students mentioned asking questions and soliciting comments, PowerPoint presentations, individual/pair/group work, group assignments and research, group lesson plans, participation, memorisation and collaboration, student presentations, teacher presentations, inductive and deductive methods, collaborative learning methods, active methods, micro-teaching/lesson presentation, LCE and teacher-centred

education, storytelling, posters with pictures, the use of textbooks or slides, role play, quizzes and puzzles, discussions, demonstrations, lectures, and mapping.

Lecturing through question-answer techniques and group work emerged as the dominant teaching methods. Though only one student explicitly mentioned lecturing, it was implied by question-and-answer techniques being used for learning and to elicit responses and comments from students. This was seen to be a means of investigating students' prior knowledge and experiences for the purposes of new learning, and of strengthening participation. But active participation could not take place as claimed: "The class size does not really allow us to participate in a class; only a few can participate because we are many" (Informant A).

They try their best to involve us, but again the number of the students. But in as much as they want to participate, they could ask questions but none would answer it. None would want to answer; everyone thinks it is a big group, why should I answer? They did really try to make it learner-centred but the student number has made it hard" (Informant G).

The larger class size was a challenge for active student participation and

interactive learning, and also restricted closer student-educator interactions, so that many students remained unknown to their lecturers:

You find that you can go through the whole of four years at the university, and your lecturer would never know your name because you are too many and also because you are discouraged to engage because you are too many. The thing is when less people are in your class you are able to talk. But where there are more people in the room, you shy away from voicing your opinions. (Informant G).

The students also referred to PowerPoint presentations since most of the lessons at the campus are presented electronically, with lecturers using such presentations. Lecturers supported active participation through the question-and-answer method by posing numerous questions to elicit responses on what students had been taught. The *demonstration method* was also used, as Informant F indicated, but the rest of students were unaware of this method.

The second preferred method appeared to be *group work*. The group method is used in various ways, as emerged from the responses. It extended to outside learning activities, assignments, presentations, research

projects and lesson planning or micro-teaching through which students share their contributions. To reiterate, it features efforts to foster cooperative and interactive learning among the students. It can also be regarded as a mechanism for coping with larger classes and mitigating educators' marking heavy loads. However, its effectiveness and efficiency were questioned. Lecturers would set group activities, "but sometimes not all of us really participate in the groups, for example you can get a group assignment of 10 people, but only five people contribute" (Informant A).

Some students just let others do the activities, they do not participate. They just let others do the activities for them ... you do not want to be seen as bad [so] we just also include them in the assignments, sometimes we [write their names on the scripts]. (Informant B)

There is not much *pair* or *individual work*. The individual work is rarely used except when writing tests. This context of its utilisation cannot be considered an instructional method since it does not involve actual teaching. The *discussion method* seems to refer to small group discussions when students work in teams, rather than the whole class being involved in a discussion. Again, discussions could not succeed due to the large classes.

The students' responses also revealed knowledge gaps, and some students did not know what teaching methods are. They were confused regarding what constitutes a teaching method, a teaching strategy, and communication tools, for example whether prior learning or the thematic approach are teaching methods or strategies. Some could not distinguish teaching methods from teaching approaches and overreaching pedagogical approaches: LCE, teacher-centred education, cooperative approach, participation, collaboration, memorisation, active method, and mapping were all regarded by some as methods of teaching. Some students also mentioned inductive and deductive methods, among others, but other students did not understand these terms at all.

The students' responses did not mention methods that are more applicable to English teaching, such as *debates, dialogues, whole class discussions, role playing, guest speakers, narration, interviews, storytelling and drama*. Thus, there is a severe lack of generic didactics applicable to the teaching of English. No students (except Informant F) had a full understanding of *lecturing*, which is frequently used at institutions of higher learning as a teaching method. Reference was also made by Informant H to *quizzes, puzzles, posters with pictures and use of textbooks or slides* as teaching methods,

which implied incomplete knowledge of what constitutes a method. The responses did not reveal students being actively engaged in extensive and intensive tasks that require critical and analytical investigation and interpretation, like reading texts/articles/literature and making presentations or writing about they have read. In practice, they thus do not reveal cyclical, non-linear, open and interactional learning in which students are deeply engaged in establishing even multiple meanings of learning topics, which is incompatible with the basic principles of constructivist education.

Placing students at the centre of teaching and learning

Placing students at the centre of education is another key constructivist principle that involves creating sensible opportunities for students to actively interact and engage in knowledge creation (Prawat, 1992). It implies considering students' life experiences, views, needs, interests, and pace of learning to determine content, organisation, and progression of the teaching-learning process, including individual attention (Kristensen, 1999; Storeng, 2002). At this juncture, we examine active participation in learning, learning with understanding and meaning, responsibility for and ownership of learning, and development of problem-solving skills and critical, independent reasoning

abilities. As before, active participation was sought through class presentations and lecturers asking questions, probing their prior knowledge. Some students linked critical thinking to being expected to act independently and solve problems, for example when doing assignments or managing their own study timetables. The responses revealed simplistic, shallow and narrow levels and means by which the core skills are developed, and not any deeper involvement or exploration.

Another way of examining the centre of education is to focus on the *student and learning content dichotomy*. Is it the students or the learning content that occupies the centre? The students found the content being more emphasised than they themselves. For Informant B, focusing on content is appropriate since they would be required to apply subject matter knowledge in their own teaching, and she therefore regarded it as being important. Informant D observed: “there is not much [that is] at the centre since lecturers come to classes and do more of lecturer-centered teaching. Classes only feature student-centered education when students are doing micro-teaching.”

So, as a result of time constraints, most of the lessons were more lecturer-centred, and placing students at the centre would not have allowed for adequate coverage of the modules’

contents. According to Informant B: “... when we are in English lectures, it is more on the lecturers. They go in front, they present their lessons, and the lecturer is out and we proceed the next day until December. It is mostly teacher-centred.” These responses illustrate the linear as opposed to cyclical nature of learning, and indicate highly lecturer-driven learning.

Learning with conceptual understanding and meaning making meets a similar fate:

Lecturers tried to promote understanding by explaining and, when assessing, by looking for understanding rather than focusing on things that are memorised ... most students use their own understanding regarding the subject content since lecturers offer at least 20% or 30% of the subject content and the students have to search for 70% ... meaning that students are not [taught well] ... the lecturer is only there to lecture; it is only to give instructions or [help] the students to see [Informant F]. According to [Informant H], they are not always told everything in the class. So, they have to go out and search for more information about the topic to understand. (Informant F)

Learning with understanding and meaning-making appears to

be contradicted by the assessment questions set being objective rather than subjective. The questions tend to be short answers, multiple choices, definitions, filling in, true-false, matching, etc. The students' view of teaching and examination is that they felt compelled to memorise for examinations so that they could "get the subject out of the way".

As indicated above, *active interaction* and *collaboration* is mostly assured through group activities, by extracting students' prior knowledge and doing presentations or micro-teaching in groups. Students planned and presented lessons as groups with each member responsible for a particular component of the lesson. This occurred when they had to respond to questions that were raised, or when they raised questions or offered comments. Group learning was also extended to assignments for which group members would be assigned the same marks. Since there were so many students, lecturers could not give more individualised assignments, except on occasion to pairs of students.

Another angle from which the centre of education can be viewed is by a looking into how *students' educational needs and interests* and *the need for individual attention* are addressed. Students stated that their needs and interests were considered particularly when the majority of them performed

poorly, for example following a test, when they would be given the opportunity to redo the work. What can be derived from students' views is that educators did make some attempt to meet students' educational needs and interests, but not to a substantial degree. Students could be assisted when they approached educators as a group as opposed to individually, but in most cases only when it concerned an assessment. According to Informant G, this was because student numbers were so high, and it was rare that students' educational needs would be individually addressed.

What about receiving *individual attention and assistance*? Informant B observed that all the lecturers have consultation hours, and if students have difficulties, they can approach the lecturer for help. As indicated above, it is more feasible to acquire group assistance than individual assistance. As mentioned, individual students do not communicate their educational problems to the lecturers except when it comes to assessment matters.

[Attention is not given to] individual needs, [but to] a group, to some extent; students do not communicate their problems to the lecturers, only if an assignment is difficult or not clear, they approach lecturers as a group ... students [are not] learning at their own

pace. Learning at one's own pace at the university is closer to a myth.
(Informant G)

So, helping students individually and offering assistance remains a challenge.

Resources

The delivery of the curriculum is often tied to the learning environment and its contents (Van Harmelen, 2001). We now briefly view the grounds of the foundation laid (or not laid) to enable constructivist learning, focusing on educational resources/facilities, class size, the student-to-educator ratio, timetabling, and other factors. Constructivism demands a rich environment with a variety of resource materials available. As shown above, students view class sizes as being too large, which results in overcrowding of the available learning spaces. Some students describe Hifikepunye Pohamba Campus as the largest satellite campus, accommodating over 3,000 students each year. There are times when classes experience venue clashes, as the venues are mistakenly allocated to different student class groups at the same time. Lecture halls are often full to capacity, with some students being left outside. Students have to share seats, or sit on the floor. They expressed the need for additional learning spaces. The limited space requires some lessons to be held in the evenings. Moving around in the

classrooms during lessons is also a challenge. Teacher educators might be there lecturing, but may fail to exercise tight control and management over the classes, especially with regard to the students sitting at the back, as they tend to do their own thing, use cell phones, and make a noise, thus making it difficult for anyone to concentrate. Ensuring regular class attendance is also difficult, and establishing closer interpersonal relationships and addressing students' educational needs is well nigh impossible. Thus, educators may find it difficult to ensure adequate supervision and monitoring of every student's learning trajectory.

In terms of theory application, there are far reaching implications, most notably that active engagement diminishes. Informant A noted that the overcrowded classes do not allow for active student participation: "For English classes, the class size does not really allow us to participate in a class, only a few can participate because we are too many." This situation has also led lecturers to focus more on their presentations rather than on students: "lecturers are only focusing on presentations, not like to interact with the students, to get what they do not understand and all those questions" (Informant I); "it is a problem; students are not well groomed, well coached" (Informant F).

The poor educational resource pool is another factor that negatively impacts the delivery of the desired goals of learning. There is general agreement among the respondents that educational resources and facilities are inadequate. Students revealed that they do not receive enough learning materials for all of them. They normally expect to be offered course outlines and study guides. However, the study guides produced by the university, while they may be helpful in some cases, are not always relevant and comprehensive regarding their contents. “The materials that are provided are also not relevant ... mostly because some information is omitted. Some of the things are not there” (Informant F).

The study guides are often given in a digital format rather than as hard copies. Students can access these on the UNAM portal when they have been uploaded. Accessibility can be a worrisome factor for those students struggling to secure government funding in order to buy their own laptops. Textbooks are not always prescribed, and even when they are, they may be unavailable at the campus bookshop. To cover the module contents, educators attempt to present notes as slides. The problem with notes in the form of slides is that they do not always reflect all the contents, and may assume information and knowledge which is lacking. Students thus feel forced to go the extra mile to look for

broader information on the learning topics: “They are just short points, they are not really explaining [the topic] ... you have to go out and search for more information” (Informant B). The resultant danger is that students can be left with shallow knowledge and understanding of the learning contents when well-written resources are absent. A single period lasts for 55 minutes, and that timetabling further stifles educators’ creativity and innovation in deciding about the what, how, why, and when of teaching.

Against the background of a tripling of the student population in recent years, the responses show the campus to be overpopulated because of the large classes and high student enrolment, not only in English modules, but across the curriculum. (The student population appears to have tripled over the course of some years.) This can be understood in the context of the high demand for tertiary education and the ongoing efforts to expand access to a greater proportion of the population. This situation culminates in overcrowded classrooms, and further results in a high student-to-educator ratio. Inevitably, this trend negatively impacts the educational environment. The shortage of resources also appears to be a question of budget constraint, as larger classes are not accompanied by an expanded base of educational materials or infrastructure. Over time, efforts to improve standards

and the provision of quality education seem to be suffocated. This cause-and-effect triangle breeds a situation where students do not feel well taken care of: “Yes, it is a problem; students are not well groomed, well coached” (Informant F). The outcome is that there is physical access to schooling, but epistemological access, together with its associated views, objectives and exit learning outcomes, is not realised. One must therefore concur with Informant F’s reflection that the campus might not have been transformed into a setting that is aligned with constructivism.

Conclusion

Constructivism’s key principles and Bernstein’s theory serve as a theoretical framework for analysing the data. In this context, there is uncertainty as to whether LCE/constructivism is adequately communicated and advocated to students to inform teacher education practice. Students’ confusing of it with other educational philosophies they encountered raises concerns. They also lacked information regarding its origin and purpose, other than subverting teacher dominance in the teaching-learning process, and they failed to link it to the educational reform process within which it was adopted. This portrays a LCE pedagogy that is under-prioritised and in a fading state. This is a bleak outlook, considering that the education institutions may witness an end to LCE, raising the question of

whether LCE was actually integrated into the university teacher education. However, students’ descriptions show a general knowledge and understanding of the epistemology and some of its key perspectives. Although this understanding appears elementary, unstable and inconclusive, it suggests that there is potential for further development. It also indicates that students have LCE backgrounds from their high schools, since they indicated that they rarely touched on it at during their tertiary studies.

The level and means of implementation of the theory is of grave concern. While students offered a fair description of it, educational practices show that its theoretical perspectives are not translated into action. Many of the ideas of constructivist learning are not practically realised. For instance, there is an absence of the constructivist element of meaningful learning, through which students should assume active roles of co-constructors of knowledge as opposed to passive recipients and consumers of the knowledge products of others. The notion of teaching-learning as a social product of collaborative effort did not emerge clearly. The students appear to be poorly equipped with higher order reasoning skills, since assessment tends to lean towards objectivity that fosters rote learning. The epistemological dimension of schooling therefore remains

practically inaccessible, as students are not adequately exposed to it, which is a further betrayal of the primary goals of education for social justice.

Like the students, the educators appear to be constrained by the contexts of scarce resources/facilities, large classes, limiting timetables, high student-to-educator ratios, and other inadequate amenities. As curriculum implementers, they are restricted in the instructional methods available to them, with options in the main being restricted to group work and lecturing. They could not satisfy the students' educational needs and interests, including for individual attention and assistance. Due to the large classes, educators risk losing control over class attendance and the effective use of assessment to supervise and enhance active student learning.

With regards to Bernstein's theory, practices reflect a teacher-dominated and pre-determined collection curriculum that is strongly framed and classified. However, it also reveals educators who are disempowered and losing authority over some crucial didactical aspects. As students are dislodged from the centre stage of education to the periphery, a mechanical view of education (behaviourism) takes hold, and the preoccupation with covering module contents, observing course objectives, and meeting

assessment-examination requirements occurs at the expense of an enabling learning context for students.

To overcome these challenges, we recommend that the university management team, and in particular its education structures, take stock of the current state of LCE in the teacher education curriculum in close collaboration with basic education partners, with the National Institute for Educational Development acting as the Ministry of Education, Innovation, Youth, Sport, Arts and Culture's centre for curriculum development. This would be appropriate, since the university produces teachers for basic education at schools, and they may set standards that should be met by prospective professional teachers. It would be wise to pay attention to campus capacity relative to total enrolment, and the inadequacy of educational resources/infrastructure in the face of large classes, the high student-to-educator ratio, timetable constraints, and poor overall infrastructure condition, in order to establish whether they are currently in a state to create a learning environment in which education underpinned by constructivism could thrive. We further propose that closer attention be paid to the issue and place of theory in education, and would suggest that concerted efforts be made to foreground appropriate theory in education, as the attention currently

paid appears to be trivial. We are convinced that the failure to address the issue of constructivism/LCE may bring about its fading and eventually death in Namibia's education system, since the teacher education field bears co-responsibility for its sustainability.

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The Relevance of Theological Education in Contemporary Namibia: A Contextual Analysis of the United Lutheran Theological Seminary–Paulinum

Emma N. Nangolo

Abstract:

Since 1963, the curriculum at the United Lutheran Theological Seminary (ULTS)–Paulinum has remained largely unchanged, structured around the study fields of biblical studies, church history, systematic theology, and practical theology. This article examines the relevance of ULTS–Paulinum’s theological education within Namibia’s socioeconomic and developmental context. Using a qualitative case study approach, the study examines ULTS–Paulinum’s Bachelor and Diploma programmes through historical, social and theological lenses. Drawing on insider perspectives and documentary analysis, it explores how theological formation is implemented and adapted. The findings indicate that the curriculum is inadequate for addressing key social justice issues such as land reform, gender dynamics, LGBTQ+ inclusion, poverty, and unemployment. Consequently, ULTS–Paulinum’s training falls short in equipping church leaders to engage effectively with present societal challenges. As a contribution

to ongoing discussions on reimagining theological education in Africa, the article recommends regular curriculum reviews to ensure that theological training remains relevant and responsive to evolving societal challenges.

Keywords: theological education, contextual theology, social justice, Namibia

Introduction

Namibia is a predominantly Christian country, with approximately 90% of the population identifying as Christian (September, 2020) and around 65% affiliating with the Lutheran denomination (Nangolo, 2020). As such, Christianity continues to be deeply embedded in the social, cultural and moral fabric of Namibian society. As a result, theology cannot remain sequestered in seminary- or church-related silos; it is entangled with the broader social, political, and economic realities of day-to-day life in society and hence bears a public and transformative

duty. Historically, theology has shaped communal morality, informed political imagination, and guided societal responses to critical sociopolitical challenges (Melber, 2017).

Within the Lutheran tradition, theology has historically been seen as essentially public and socially transformative. Built on Reformation principles, including the centrality of vocation and the priesthood of all believers, Lutheran theology teaches that faith needs to participate in social life. The church is called to proclaim the gospel, stand with the afflicted and vulnerable, and uphold justice. Theological education, being the crucible for shaping clergy and church leaders, becomes an important site to cultivate these commitments. Without seminaries producing clergies equipped to confront social injustices, the church's public witness risks being dulled down and unconnected to the day-to-day realities of Namibian communities.

Although Namibia has enjoyed political freedom since 1990, social and economic disparities remain. Challenges such as land distribution, unemployment, poverty, gender-based violence, and limited access to quality education and healthcare illustrate enduring structural disparities. The legacies of colonialism and apartheid still pervade modern life, while contemporary issues such as corruption and climate change, as well

as debates about gender and sexuality, also complicate the national scene. In essence, although independence was politically transforming for Namibia, many structural inequities remained, highlighting the urgent need for institutions, including the church and those offering theological education, to actively engage these realities.

In this context, while the church's mission may not change, theology must continually engage with changing realities. This is in line with the vision of *ecclesia semper reformanda* ("the church must always be reformed"), which emphasises the church's continual self-examination and renewal. Theological education, accordingly, must continually evolve to prevent becoming stagnant or remaining fixed in the status quo.

This article seeks to examine the structure and relevance of theological education in the Namibian context, with emphasis on the formation (the holistic shaping of a person) offered at ULTS–Paulinum (sometimes referred to as "the Seminary"). It raises a critical question: In contemporary Namibia, characterised by persistent social injustice, does theology still hold transformative relevance? More specifically: Does the Seminary's theological education sufficiently equip the clergy to challenge unjust systems and promote dignity, justice and equity? Does

it speak to life in Namibia as reflected in public discourse and newspaper headlines, day in and day out? Does it relate Scripture to daily life in any substantive way? Addressing these questions is important if theology is to remain relevant in our context, where many people have little or no way of changing their realities. Through examinations of curriculum structures, pedagogical approaches, and the practical formation of the Bachelor and Diploma programmes, the article seeks to determine whether theological education equips the clergy to meaningfully engage in social transformation and public witness.

The paper situates ULTS–Paulinum in the broader context of Namibia’s theological landscape. Within close geographical proximity, there are three theological institutions in Windhoek: ULTS–Paulinum, the Namibian Evangelical Theological Seminary, and St Charles Lwanga Major Seminary. Each institution is different in ethos and theological persuasion. The Namibian Evangelical Theological Seminary is an evangelical, multi-denominational theological seminary which emphasises evangelical theology. St Charles Lwanga Major Seminary focuses on catholic theological formation, and the Seminary is specifically Lutheran, with focus on pastoral formation. Despite the denominational variance, all three institutions have one mission

in common: to produce Christian leaders equipped for pastoral, liturgical, and social ministry. Inter-institutional collaboration, especially in terms of the curricula, is very limited, as each seminary is guided by its own theological emphasis and history. Furthermore, all three only offer a general understanding of theology at undergraduate level, without specialisation in any theological stream.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach to examine the structure, relevance, and transformative potential of theological education at the Seminary. This approach allows for in-depth exploration of bachelor and diploma programmes in their specific historical, social, and theological contexts in Namibia. It is especially suited for studying complex phenomena, such as how curricula, pedagogy, and practical formation interact to prepare clergy for social transformation and public witness. By focusing on the Seminary as a bounded system, the study captures the institutional, pedagogical, and societal dynamics that shape theological formation.

This article focuses on the curriculum of ULTS–Paulinum as the primary instrument through which the relevance of theological education is articulated. As Barnett and Coates (2005) emphasised, curriculum design should be understood

as a continuous, analytical, recurring and introspective process, rather than a static framework. Furthermore, an effective curriculum should integrate the interrelated dimensions of knowing, acting, and being, which together constitute holistic engagement in higher education.

In addition to curriculum analysis, the author taps on insider perspectives. Having studied at ULTS–Paulinum from 2012 to complete a Bachelor of Theology degree and served as a part-time lecturer from 2019 to 2025, the author possesses a deep contextual understanding of the Seminary’s curriculum, pedagogy, and practical formation processes. This combined experience as both a former student and a faculty member enriches the study by providing contextual insight into how theological education is implemented, experienced, and adapted over time, thereby complementing the formal documentary evidence.

ULTS–Paulinum Theological Education

ULTS–Paulinum in its present form is a merger of the former Paulinum Seminary of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Republic of Namibia (ELCRN) and the Theological Seminary of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia (ELCIN). This merger was consolidated in 1963 with the registration of students coming

from both churches at a new campus in Otjimbingwe (Tjibeba, 2013).

ULTS–Paulinum is the oldest institute of higher learning in Namibia and has developed over countless decades (Isaak, 2013). Prior to its founding in Otjimbingwe, the two Lutheran churches serving black congregations in the country, ELCIN and ELCRN, trained their pastors and evangelists separately. ELCIN opened its Theological Seminary at Oniipa in 1922, with the aim of “enrich[ing] the candidates for ministerial services with a sound knowledge of Scripture and the basic elements of the Christian faith” (Shivute & Shivute, 2013). In 1946, the Theological Seminary was moved from Oniipa to Elim. ELCRN established its Theological Seminary, Paulinum, at Karibib in 1938, initially with the purpose of training only evangelists, but later with an expanded programme that included the formation of pastors (Tjibeba, 2013).

Around the mid-1980s, the location of the Seminary at Otjimbingwe was increasingly seen as geographically isolated from other higher learning institutions in Namibia. There were concerns that the seminary’s isolation would hinder students’ broader academic development, restrict exposure to interdisciplinary perspectives, and reduce opportunities for collaborative learning. As a solution, the Seminary

was relocated to Windhoek in 1997 (Nambala, 2013). The move was also designed to improve experiential learning by providing practical ministry opportunities in diverse cultural settings such as hospitals, prisons, and local congregations. Additionally, the city offers improved access to information technology, research resources, and educational services, all of which are essential for contextual theological training.

It is important to note that right from the start, the Lutheran churches in Namibia did not take theological education lightly. They considered it to be central within the overarching ministry of the Church. As a result, ELCRN and ELCIN established ULTS–Paulinum, while the German Lutheran Church preferred to send their students to Germany for theological formation.¹

In 2007, three academic qualifications offered by the Seminary were accredited by the Namibia Qualifications Authority (NQA): the Certificate in Theology (NQA Level 5), the Diploma in Theology (NQA Level 6) and the Bachelor of Theology (NQA Level 7). Both the Bachelor of

Theology and the Diploma in Theology fulfil the requirements for ordained ministry in both constituent churches of the seminary. Their formal curricula thus play a central role in the process of pastoral formation. The Certificate in Theology is designed to prepare candidates for lay ministry. Consequently, it only equips candidates with basic theological acquaintance and leadership skills which allow them to serve as lay preachers, youth leaders or Sunday school and confirmation class teachers.

According to the 2022 ULTS–Paulinum prospectus, the “main objective of the Seminary is to train men and women for the ordained ministry” (United Lutheran Theological Seminary Paulinum, 2022). As Nambala (2013) also noted, the seminary has always trained students to be faithful proclaimers of the gospel and interpreters of the Christian message in whatever context they are placed to serve. Upon completion of their academic programmes, students are expected to contextualise biblical teachings and to make a transformative impact on the communities they serve. It should be noted that the clergy in Namibia face enormous demands. They are expected to minister to the whole person within society, addressing their spiritual, social, and personal needs. This requires the theological education they receive to be more than just the transfer of theological knowledge, but to build theological depth, spirituality,

1 “Even Paulinum Theological Seminary has been open for the students of all the Lutheran Churches; the ELCIN (GELC) so far has not sent any student there for pastoral training” (Shuuya 1995:22). Up to now, ELCIN (GELC) sends their students to Germany for theological education.

contextual understanding and pastoral competence.

Academic admissions for new students are done on biennial basis, primarily drawing from ELCRN and ELCIN, as well as from the Anglican Diocese of Namibia, and Lutheran churches in neighbouring Botswana and South Africa. According to Tjibeba (2013), the ULTS–Paulinum curriculum, which has remained unchanged for a long time, was first offered in Afrikaans and only later changed to English.²

Through its theological education, the Seminary has played a formative role in shaping Lutheran and Anglican clergy, theologians and faith communities in Namibia. Moreover, through the contributions and leadership of its graduates, it has significantly influenced the development of values, practices, and patterns of life within local communities. Its establishment constituted an important milestone in anchoring Lutheran theology in Namibia and in fostering ecumenical relations in national contexts. Through this development, Christianity in Namibia could expand in contextual depth, and in interdenominational collaboration and participation.

Since its establishment in 1963, Paulinum has produced ministers who are grounded in biblical scholarship and church doctrine. However, despite its long-standing contribution, the seminary's curriculum has remained largely static, raising questions about its responsiveness to contemporary societal challenges. Issues such as poverty, unemployment, climate change, gender inequalities, land reform, and broader social justice concerns increasingly demand clergy who are not only theologically proficient but also socially aware and actively engaged in addressing the lived realities of their communities.

Contextualising Theological Education in Africa

In Africa, theological education did not originate from African philosophical worldviews or contexts. It was introduced by the missionaries and adopted with little respect for local peoples' cultures, social backgrounds, and histories (Gaga, 2021). For decades, much of the theology taught in African theological schools and universities reflected Western philosophical assumptions, scholarly templates, and theological emphases. As a result, such theological education frequently failed to address the pressing spiritual, socioeconomic and political challenges confronting local communities (Maluleke, 2010). It is as Gaga (2021, p. 224) observed, “a theology that fails to engage post-apartheid tensions in

2 While no published source identifies a specific year in which ULTS–Paulinum officially shifted its medium of instruction from Afrikaans to English, the change could reasonably be situated in the 1980s, when many Namibian educational institutions began adopting English.

South Africa, ongoing instability in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, corruption in Nigeria, or contested political leadership in Uganda” (and one might add, social injustice in Namibia) “cannot claim to be relevant.” Theology must speak to lived realities; otherwise, it remains abstract and disconnected.

One of the consistent themes in African theological discourse is that education ought to be truly contextual. Many African theologians who trained in Western institutions returned home with frameworks fashioned by Western ideas, questions, and assumptions, just to be disappointed that they did not know how to apply them in local contexts (Brunsdon, 2021; Higgs, 2015). The call for African theological studies to provide students with contextually appropriate education has a long history. African theologians and scholars such as Mbiti (1976), Maluleke (2010), Moyo (2010), Chitando (2010), Nangolo (2013), and Isaak (2016) have all raised concerns about the quality of theological education and ministerial formation in Africa, and have called for a shift from European theological structures to African contexts.

Mburua (2019) is of the opinion that African hermeneutics is key to authentic theological education, whereas Maimela (2017) calls for mutual respect among students from diverse hermeneutical traditions. For them both, the

art and science of respectful dialogue with other theological traditions are among the main skills required for the clergy of contextualized theology.

Emphasising the need for contextual theological considerations, Stamoolis (2020) compared the questions about God that arise in different cultural and social contexts. He noted that in much Western theology, the dominant question has been: “How can I be made right with God?” Consequently, theological education has emphasised justification by faith and the individual’s relationship with God. In many African contexts, by contrast, the central concern would not be about personal salvation, but wholeness. Africans are concerned with living in harmony with the living, the ancestors, nature, spiritual forces, and the Supreme Being. The quest is for the “good life”: a life of balance, blessing, and common good. In the same vein, Töttemeyer (2017) illustrated that the concept of reconciliation can be understood and experienced differently in Africa than in Europe. In Africa, reconciliation is closely tied to post-conflict and is community centred, aiming for repair and restoration. In the European worldview, reconciliation focuses more on diplomatic normalisation, emphasising structural integrations.

Nevertheless, the main unchanging argument is that Western-influenced models of practising theology have,

in many cases, failed to meaningfully engage African contexts—that they are often unable to respond to local cultural, social, and historical realities. They have tried but have failed to equip graduates to transform their communities.

According to Brunsdon and Knoetze (2021), the idea of contextualisation has a home in the term ‘theology’ itself. Theology derives from the Greek words *theos* (God) and *logos* (word, study), meaning the study of God. It should also be emphasised that *logos* is never abstract. It is always word about something, someone, a particular setting, and is therefore always contextual. Brunsdon & Knoetze (ibid.) argue that first and foremost, theological education entails understanding God’s engagement within a contextual paradigm, taking the local context and all knowledge present seriously. Therefore, the study of God cannot be divorced from the study of God’s work in history and society. If theological education is limited to intellectual reflection without social application, it falls short of its calling. To study God in abstraction, without considering historical and social conditions, limits theology to intellectual reflection and diminishes its transformative potential.

Contextual theological education recognises that theology is never abstract or culturally free. It arises out of true histories, cultures, and struggles.

In the Namibian context, this should encompass the legacies of colonisation, economic inequality, ethnic diversity, interreligious tensions, and thriving indigenous spiritualities. Ignoring these contexts produces a theology that speaks to itself in a foreign language, divorced from the people it is intended to serve. The goal of theological education, understood in the scope of the *missio Dei* (“the mission of God”), is transformational rather than simply informational. As Moon (2017, p. 46) argued, theological education should go beyond the acquisition of beliefs or behaviours; it should transform individuals’ identities and vocations for meaningful participation in the divine mission in their own contexts. Personal conversion, community reconciliation, social justice, and cultural renewal are all encompassed in transformation.

Contextual theological education means engaging African worldviews in “doing theology”—bringing local cultural forms (e.g., storytelling, music, ritual, proverbs, community traditions), in conjunction with Scripture, and allowing these elements to dynamically interact. In this way, theology is transformed into something incarnational, grounded in the local context while still being open to dialogue with wider global theological discourse.

Emphasising the dynamic nature of African societies, Byaruhanga (2013, p.

154) notes that “the Region of yesterday is neither the Region of today nor that of tomorrow”. Rapid urbanisation, digitalisation, secularisation, migration, youth movements, and changing political climates require the clergy of contemporary Africa to be prepared for and adaptable to evolving contexts.

Structure and Methodology of Theological Education (1963–2021)

As we know, the origins of theological education in Namibia relate to its missionary foundations. As a result, its approaches, curricula and epistemological beliefs were essentially constructed on the basis of Western paradigms, often without appropriate adaptation to the Namibian sociocultural context. McCoy (2012), citing the South African missiologist David Bosch, noted that the introduction of theological studies in Africa followed a fourfold structure: biblical studies; church history; systematic theology; and practical theology. This model has also been the standard framework of theological education at the Seminary

since 1963 (Tjibeba, 2013), and was maintained until 2022.

As shown in Table 1 below, if all subjects were taught in strict accordance with the syllabi and prescribed textbooks, then all interpretive frameworks, theological resources and methodologies, as well as doctrinal formulations presented to students, would overwhelmingly have been shaped by Western academic traditions. Simply put, theological knowledge is produced and transmitted at the curriculum level, as mediated most effectively through the scope of European intellectual history and its extensions.

In biblical studies, the exclusive reliance on Western scholarship means that all hermeneutical approaches, including historical, textual, and literary-critical methodologies, were cast as normative and universal. While these approaches may have proven significant for the advancement of scholarship and their exegetical rigour over time, the underlying cultural and philosophical

Table 1 *Western and African authors in ULTS–Paulinum curricula*

Theological stream	Prescribed textbooks (numbers)	
	Western authors (%)	African authors (%)
Biblical Studies	100	0
Church History	75	25
Systematic Theology	100	0
Practical Theology	75	25

assumptions largely emerged from Enlightenment rationalism, post-Reformation theological debates, and specific European historical settings. Students of biblical studies were certainly equipped with deep understanding of the Scripture in its original historical, cultural and literary settings, thereby enhancing exegetical competence. However, the absence of African biblical scholarship and contextual interpretive models, risked marginalising voices and perspectives drawn from oral tradition, communal modes of interpretation, postcolonial critique, and African cosmological approaches. Consequently, students' interpretive imaginations may be formed within a relatively narrow epistemological horizon, to the advantage of Western academic frameworks, but to the detriment of local theological reflection.

Although church history includes some African authors, the imbalance reflects that the overarching narrative of Christianity is still largely a European story. Students were taught to appreciate both a chronological perspective and thematic overview of the origins, expansion, and doctrinal development of the Christian church across the centuries. Through this, students become familiar with major councils, reform movements, missionary expansions, and confessional traditions of the Christian faith. However, the syllabi were deeply Eurocentric and oriented

more closely towards Western church history and missionary confessional traditions, with considerably less emphasis on African church history and its local ecclesial experiences. As a result, students of church history could only have been partially exposed to the distinct historical trajectories, struggles, and contributions of Africans to Christianity. This imbalance may inadvertently have cemented an historiographical bias in which African Christianity has been conceptualised as peripheral, derivative, or purely missionary-dependent, rather than ancient, resilient and dynamic. Such framing is especially problematic in relation to the historical significance of North African Christianity in the early centuries of the Church.

In systematic theology, the implications of curriculum composition are especially profound. Doctrinal formulations about God, Christology, soteriology, ecclesiology, and eschatology derive decisively from a historical course in Europe, from patristic debates to medieval scholasticism, to Reformation confessions and modern European theology. Although the study of systematic theology provided students with a structured and critical approach to understanding core doctrines and the intellectual foundations of the Christian faith, the lack of African theological texts limited the contextual range of this engagement. When African voices are excluded, doctrinal reflection

comes off as culturally neutral, while it reflects specific European historical and philosophical trajectories.

Practical theology shows significantly greater diversity, something which could be attributed to the contextual and applied characteristics of ministerial training. However, continuing dominance of European authors indicates that most pastoral models, counselling frameworks, homiletical paradigms, and ecclesial forms may still be largely imported rather than organically developed from African contexts. This may create friction between theological training and actual congregational lived experiences.

In the spirit of resistance and contextualisation, three specific subjects, Liberation Theology, Black Theology, and African Theology, were introduced in the curriculum in the early 1960s, initially to challenge and oppose apartheid theology. These three subjects later came to be understood as forms of theological reflection that moved beyond classical confessional frameworks of the missionaries, to allow students to critically examine issues of justice, oppression, cultural identity, and inter-religious dialogue (Buys & Nambala, 2003; Tjibeba, 2013). Working under both the heavy pressure of armed struggle and the hope for liberation, the Seminary adopted a consciously contextual and praxis-oriented approach

to theological education. Rather than treating theology as a purely academic discipline, it constructed a teaching that responded directly to the social, political, and economic challenges of the period. By introducing those three contextualised subjects, the Seminary chose to emphasise God's preferential concern for the poor and oppressed, a clear call for the church to assume an active and prophetic role in the struggle for justice and freedom. Consequently, students were equipped to interpret the Bible against the backdrop of suffering, inequality, and systemic injustice, interpreting the Gospel as a call for holistic liberation: spiritual, social, and political liberation. In this, theology was based on God's commitment to liberation and transformation. With this development, theological education at the Seminary played a major role in shaping theological thoughts and reflections, not only in Namibia, but across Southern Africa.

According to Nangula (2013), Liberation Theology was introduced during the years of suffering and humiliation. Its content and structure considered the victims of oppression and injustice as the context or *Sitz-im-leben* ("seat in life") of its theologising (Mujoro & Mujoro, 1989). This was also about the same period when churches in Namibia began to align themselves more openly with SWAPO as a liberation movement. Liberation

Theology was important because before Namibia's independence, Christianity was used by some as a weapon for control and breaking down, as a tool of colonialism, racism and apartheid (Isaak, 2020). For example, acts of violence and wars were committed in the name of religion, which resulted in the genocide of 1904–1908 (Mujoro & Mujoro, 1989).

By offering Black Theology, the Seminary upheld the dignity, identity and agency of black people in the face of racial oppression. This subject offered an adequate theological basis for resisting apartheid by insisting that God stands in solidarity with the oppressed, and clearly declaring that racism is incompatible with the Christian teaching of salvation.

African Theology was also a significant component of the curriculum, introduced in response to the intense pressures and dominance of European theological perspectives. It was, as Ndaikwila (2017) observed, that when European missionaries arrived in Africa, they saw Africans mostly as needy people. They then constructed an understanding that Christians are called to do good works for the poor, the marginalised, and the helpless. In this framework, the poor were seen as recipients of European charity, and Europeans as active agents who must “roll up their sleeves” and

practice their faith by helping those in need. Underlying this perspective was a problematic divide between “good Christians” and “needy Africans”, reflecting a deeper separation between actors and beneficiaries, agents and clients, and ultimately between subjects and objects. Such a model ignores the dignity and agency of the poor, as well as their rights. It failed to realise that the poor are not passive recipients of aid but are always enacting strategies to survive, adapt, resist, and pursue freedom.

African Theology therefore sought to challenge these assumptions by defending active participation, a voice and theological resonance of African people in their historical and social context, and in the principle of African Ubuntu (“I am because we are”). A major factor of African Theology is the acknowledgement that African spirituality, anthropology, politics, and culture is rich in values which can enhance people's understanding, application, and contextualisation of their faiths, and betterment of their living conditions/praxis (Isaak, 2016; Ndaikwila, 2017). In this sense, African Theology sought to interpret the Christian faith from within African cultures, worldviews, symbols, histories, and everyday experiences, rather than accepting a limited view that European theologies are the sole or normative categories for practising theology. By aligning itself with this view, the

Seminary participated in the broader project of decolonising theology and fostered an authentic African Christian identity rooted in local realities.

Unfortunately, due to intense political hostility and constant surveillance during the liberation struggle (Tjibeba, 2013), the teachings of Liberation Theology and Black Theology alongside African Theology were highly secretive. As a result, no books on these subjects were openly published, displayed or made readily accessible (Ngodji, 2017). Nevertheless, such contextualising of theology resulted in major paradigm shifts, enabling the two black Lutheran churches in the country to adopt a strong stand against South African rule and its racist apartheid ideology, which subjected much of Namibia's black population to systemic social injustice.

An outstanding example was their celebrated Open Letter directed to South African Prime Minister John Vorster in 1971. The Open Letter marked the beginning of an open protest culture in Namibia (Tötemeyer, 2017). It was issued at an imperative historical juncture, boldly declaring that Namibia's independence was imminent and morally justified. It expressed fundamental theological and moral beliefs about fighting for liberation, justice, peace, and forgiveness and the reconciled and restored nation it envisaged (Isaak, 2020). The 1971

Open Letter was also the catalyst for the process of conscientisation among the Namibian people. It contributed significantly to an increase in awareness, and space was opened for both religious and political institutions to play more active roles in the liberation struggle. As a result of this action, faith communities played an important part in the collective struggle that eventually culminated in the 1989 elections supervised by the United Nations, leading up to Namibia's independence on 21 March 1990 (ibid.). The enduring relevance of the Open Letter is that it publicly reconnected orthodoxy (right belief) and orthopraxis (right action). Religious and political players alike confirmed that theology and ethics could not be disconnected from social and political duties. In connecting faith, morality, politics and human rights, they testified to an important fact: religion, fundamentally, is social ethics (Nangula, 2013).

After independence, Liberation Theology and Black Theology were no longer seen as relevant subjects for Namibia, and so they were discontinued, while African Theology remained in the curriculum.

It is noteworthy that ULTS–Paulinum was amongst the institutions of theological education in Southern Africa that were at the forefront of contextual theological education

during the apartheid years (Tötemeyer, 2017). Even if contextualisation was not always formally included in the written curriculum and syllabi, it was deeply streamlined in the ethos of the teaching. Students were encouraged to extrapolate Scriptures and Christian doctrine through the lens of injustice, inequality, and racial discrimination. In this way, contextual theology became a lived approach to students. Ideologies such as black consciousness and other liberation views added value to the theological education of the Seminary (Buys & Nambala, 2003). By integrating such views, both formally and informally, the Seminary produced students with awareness of social realities and a strong prophetic consciousness able to reflect their socio-political context.

In Practical Theology, a discipline that prepares students for applied ministry, some subjects have continued to be Eurocentric. For example, Healing and Counselling continued to be taught according to European models, using European textbooks, with little incorporation of African cultural practices, communal healing approaches, or local understandings of wellbeing.

Some pressing social issues, like poverty, gender-based violence and the HIV/AIDS pandemic, were occasionally mentioned in classes or assignments,

but were not formally integrated as specific subjects or components of the syllabi. As such, students had few opportunities to engage systematically with these critical challenges. Because the curriculum did not have an explicit focus on these topics, despite students being theoretically aware of them, there was minimal practical training or provision of context to equip them to address these realities which were, and are so widespread in Namibian communities.

It is noted that, despite its long-standing curriculum, theological education at the Seminary has not been without challenges. As Nambala (2013) and Nangolo (2013) observed, the reliance on an unchanged curriculum framework for so long contributed to structural and pedagogical limitations, thereby restricting contextual adaptation and innovation in response to emerging theological, social and ecclesial developments. Consequently, part of the curriculum no longer sufficiently engaged contemporary theological discourses, local cultural realities, or the practical demands of ministerial formation.

The ULTS- Paulinum Curriculum since 2022

The revised ULTS–Paulinum curriculum was implemented in 2022 (ULTS Paulinum, 2022). Interestingly, it is still structured to provide a solid grounding

in the fourfold stream: Biblical Studies, Church History, Systematic Theology, and Practical Theology, while introducing an additional stream, namely Context. At face value, this development signals a conscious effort aimed at integrating awareness of context in theological education alongside academic rigor, spiritual formation, and pastoral preparation. However, the critical question remains: How is the revised curriculum perceived when viewed against the backdrop of contemporary Namibian society? Is the inclusion of Context a bona fide pedagogical change, or merely a cosmetic reorganisation? Does it meaningfully reshape how theology is taught and practiced, or does it simply function as an appended category without transforming the underlying epistemological assumptions of the curriculum? Considering contemporary Namibian society, with its continuing inequalities, socioeconomic dilemmas, and dynamic culture, the stakes are high. The adequacy of the revised curriculum, therefore, lies not simply in its expanded framework but in its capacity to cultivate critical reflection, prophetic imagination, and contextually responsive leadership. Without such depth, the addition of Context risks becoming symbolic, rather than transformative.

A close examination of the prescribed textbooks still reveals that, apart from being relatively old, the

selection still relies heavily on Western theological writing (see Table 2 below). It is thus not surprising that many of the materials found in the Seminary's library still come from European and American scholars whose contexts, assumptions, and theological concerns differ significantly from those of the local community the Seminary serves. The absence, or only minimal inclusion, of substantial works authored by African theologians indicates that African theological scholarship is either insufficiently integrated into the new curriculum or regarded as secondary rather than central to theological formation. As a result, students may complete their studies without meaningfully engaging African theological perspectives, methodologies and context that directly address their own social and cultural contexts. Due to the lack of contextual grounding, much of the theological education offered risks being conducted at an abstract level, detached from the concrete historical, cultural, and pastoral realities in which students will eventually minister. This abstraction can create a gap between classroom learning and lived faith experience, limiting theology's capacity to speak meaningfully and transformatively within the local context. Surely, although classical theological works remain indispensable for understanding Christian tradition, an overdependence on dated Western sources can limit engagement with

contemporary theological developments? While such works are often academically rigorous and globally respected, their dominance may inadvertently marginalise local theological voices and contextual concerns.

It was noted above that, except for the added Context stream, which is largely local and regional, the revised curriculum framework still reflects strong continuity with the theological legacy of European missionaries who founded and shaped much of its early identity. Can a curriculum developed from a historical and political context that is profoundly different from the present one still adequately prepare pastors and theologians for addressing the complex challenges of modern Namibia? For example, to what extent does it prepare students to address pressing issues like land reform, gender justice, social and economic inequality, LGBTQ+ inclusion, environmental degradation, corruption, and youth unemployment, while simultaneously nurturing leaders who can dialogue with the *missio*

Dei? Contemporary Namibia faces numerous social, economic, political, and even theological challenges and struggles, and these affect individuals, families, and communities in ways that were largely unknown in the past. Consequently, the traditional theological frameworks that dominated the missionary and apartheid eras must be critically examined and challenged to engage effectively with the realities of today. This calls for the development of new contextualised theologies.

Theological seminars

The revised curriculum for both the diploma and the bachelor programmes has significantly elevated the Theological Seminars module, which provides a platform for critical discussion, reflection and engagement with social, economic and theological ideas. This module encourages students to interact not only with established theological concepts but also with contemporary issues relevant to Namibia and the broader African context.

Table 2 *Comparative Analysis of Western and African Authors in ULTS–Paulinum’s Revised Curricula*

Theological stream	Prescribed textbooks	
	Western authors (%)	African authors (%)
Biblical Studies	100	0
Church History	70	30
Systematic Theology	100	0
Practical Theology	67	33

In the old curriculum, the Theological Seminars module was not credit-bearing (ULTS Paulinum, 2000). It was also not consistently organised or attended, which reduced its effectiveness. By designating it now as a credit-bearing requirement, the revised curriculum aims to strengthen students' engagement with the local context, with guest presenters addressing key societal challenges (ULTS Paulinum, 2022). Theological Seminars creates active forums for faculty, students and resource persons from local academia, churches, non-governmental organizations, government bodies and the private sector to critically interrogate pressing social issues affecting Namibian communities. In addition to contributing to classroom debates, they provide a context in which theological reflection can cross paths with life, helping students to recognise the relationships between faith, ethics and social responsibility. In this sense, Theological Seminars represents praxis orientation in that it connects orthodoxy (correct understanding of theology), *orthokardia* (right-heartedness, or spiritual sense toward God and neighbours) and orthopraxis (transformative action) in such a manner as to render theological education congruent with Namibia's modern-day social reality. Considering the growing inequality, deep cultural diversity, and polarisation of worldviews of our time, the approach of Theological Seminars

is consistent with the conviction that theology should commit itself anew to social justice, equity, and faithful engagement in the public sphere.

Vicariate service

Students enrolled in both Diploma and Bachelor programmes spend four full academic years engaged in the formal study of theology, with comparatively limited time allocated to practical ministerial formation in congregation settings. Although vicariate service is part of the revised curriculum, it is not credit-bearing (ULTS Paulinum, 2022). This demonstrates how the curriculum places emphasis on classroom teaching, theoretical reflection, and academic testing, with limited time for supervised vicariate service in the lived realities of congregation life. This imbalance outlines a significant gap between theological knowledge and its practical application in pastoral training in local ministry settings. In ELCRN, students are allocated one year of vicariate service in a congregation prior to ordination, whereas in ELCIN, the vicariate period is only six months. The vicariate service is intended to guide the transition from academic study to ecclesial practice by exposing candidates to the practical demands of congregational ministry. But given its relatively short duration, particularly in the ELCIN framework, it may not allow sufficient time for the development of the pastoral, adminis-

trative, and sociocultural competencies required for effective ministry. It should also be borne in mind that in African settings, education has historically been a communal, participatory enterprise that functions in tandem with everyday life. It happens in narratives, apprenticeship, rituals, and actions in the community. When theological education fails to reckon with this heritage, it estranges itself from the very people it seeks to serve. Interestingly, the length of the vicariate does not depend on the Seminary, but rather on the member churches themselves, which can be construed as an inadequacy in the formation process. The Seminary does not have the authority to direct the churches to adequately prepare for practice.

Paulinum's curriculum and gendering

The victimisation of women and children is a serious facet of social injustice in Namibia. As Nangolo (2020) noted, women and children bear the brunt of numerous forms of social injustice due to their vulnerability. How does ULTS–Paulinum's revised curriculum address gender issues, promote gender awareness, and prepare students to minister in ways that are sensitive to gender dynamics in Namibia? Women's entry into theological education at the Seminary dates back to its inception. However, equality of access is not

synonymous with equal presence in theological content. As Nangolo (2013) observed in her earlier assessment, women's voices, experiences, and theological concerns were not reflected in the curriculum, or not adequately so. The lived realities of women and their gender-specific needs were largely marginal within the formal educational programme of the Seminary. Women's theology and gender studies did not feature in core subjects, nor was literature by African women theologians made available via prescribed reading lists. The curriculum and syllabi reflected predominantly male perspectives and interpretations, often grounded in a Western patriarchal model. That disparity compromised critical thinking on topics such as gender justice, power dynamics, embodiment and sexuality, gender-based violence, and women's leadership within the church and wider society. It also meant that the clergy and theologians were not adequately prepared to confront the gendered injustices that would erupt in their congregations and communities.

The revised curriculum formally introduced a dedicated subject, Feminist and Womanist Theologies. This is a key indicator of institutional recognition that gender studies and analysis are not auxiliary aspects of theological education, but inherent features of the very formation of theological praxis. Although it is presently only one

subject, it has the potential to equip students to engage critically with issues of gender within both church and society. It can also advance students' engagement with African feminist theological traditions, and strengthen their capacity to critically interrogate patriarchal interpretations of Scripture.

On the other hand, much as the revised curriculum signifies progress, the larger issue is the continuing injustice perpetrated in Namibian society against women. Dedicated modules such as Feminist and Womanist Theologies are a corrective, but responding to gender injustice demands more than a module. It must infuse all theological pursuits and interpretation of the Bible, bear witness to the historical record of the church, and shape institutional practice. If such an approach is not taken forward, theological education could unintentionally reinforce the very patriarchal assumptions and power relations that perpetuate gender discrimination, the exclusion of women, and violence against women. Substantive transformation demands that students actively question theological language, ecclesial tradition, and cultural norms that are designed to, or have the effect of suppressing women and other susceptible groups. Only when gender justice emerges as a cross-cutting theological commitment instead of merely an additional module can equal access to theological education mature

into authentic parity in curriculum, in institutional culture, and in ministerial practice (Nangolo, 2013).

ULTS–Paulinum curriculum and contextual needs

Namibian society in the post-independence era faces a complex array of socioeconomic challenges that have significant implications for contextual theological education and pastoral formation. The times now demand that the clergy proactively engage with pressing social, economic, and cultural issues. To be adequately equipped to meet these demands, the curriculum of theological education must deliberately integrate themes such as social justice, gender studies, land reform, LGBTQ+ inclusion, poverty, and unemployment. This will ensure that graduates are both spiritually grounded and socially responsive, and able to bridge the gap between faith and the lived realities of their communities. This section is an attempt to examine how the Seminary's curriculum addresses some key social justice issues.

Land inequality: The question of land inequality is one of Namibia's most contentious and sensitive social issues. Despite government-led reforms, historical dispossession remains a trigger of social tension (von Wietersheim, 2021). For example, a small minority of large-scale

white farmers continue to control a disproportionate share of commercial farmland, reinforcing inequalities in wealth, access to resources, and food security (von Wietersheim & Shivute, 2017; Werner & Odendaal, 2010). The clergy often play a mediating role, advocating for justice, reconciliation, and ethical stewardship in their communities (Tötemeyer, 2017). Theological education must therefore provide frameworks, ethical guidance, and practical tools to engage meaningfully with land justice issues. Unfortunately, the Seminary has largely failed to integrate such content into its curriculum, leaving graduates underprepared to confront one of the nation's most pressing socio-economic challenges.

Gender inequality and LGBTQ+ inclusion: Patriarchal structures and conservative readings of Scripture may limit clergy responsiveness to women and LGBTQ+ communities (Nangolo, 2013). These structural and theological barriers manifest in both congregational practices and church leadership, where women and LGBTQ+ individuals may have limited opportunities for recognition, participation and leadership roles (Ndamanomhata, 2017). Inclusive theological education is important for fostering justice, equity, and pastoral sensitivity within communities. The introduction of Feminist and Womanist

Theologies into the curriculum, as we saw above, offers a promising step toward addressing these gaps and equipping the clergy with critical tools to engage more thoughtfully and compassionately with diverse populations. However, the impact of this inclusion remains limited, since gender justice and LGBTQ+ awareness are still treated as peripheral topics that are not worthy of streamlining across theological courses (United Lutheran Theological Seminary Paulinum, 2022). This can still leave students unprepared to address systemic inequalities or challenge discriminatory norms within their communities.

Poverty and unemployment: High levels of poverty, especially among youth and rural populations, contribute to social and economic inequality. According to the Namibia Statistics Agency (2025), the youth unemployment rate was about 44.4% in 2023. The figures are especially acute in rural areas, where youth unemployment exceeds 50% (ibid.). In this context, the clergy are often called upon to serve not only as spiritual guides, but also as community leaders, moral voices, and advocates for social and economic justice (Nangolo, 2020) as well as catalysts for local development. Faith-based initiatives such as ELCIN's Missions, Diakonia and Social Services programme, which provide women and youth with livelihood

skills, entrepreneurship support and vocational training, demonstrate how religious engagement may contribute to poverty alleviation and community empowerment. Clergy are expected to facilitate these processes through conflict mediation, resource mobilisation, community development and advocacy (ibid.). Unfortunately, these skills are not adequately represented in ULTS–Paulinum’s curriculum, leaving the clergy underprepared to address pressing socioeconomic realities in the communities they serve.

Conclusion

This article has examined the theological education of ULTS–Paulinum in the broader socioeconomic and ecclesial landscape of Namibia. In a country where Christianity still shapes public morality and social imagination, theology should not be relegated to the academic or ecclesiastical enclave. From 1963 to 2021, ULTS–Paulinum curriculum had a solid fourfold theological framework that supported doctrinal consistency and academic intensity.

Unfortunately, while the structure of the curriculum offered a consistent and systematic framework, it was greatly lacking with respect to meaningful contextualisation and local relevancy. As a result, theological knowledge was transmitted primarily through European intellectual traditions, with

limited engagement with Namibian sociocultural realities, indigenous knowledge systems, or the lived experiences of local congregations. Out of resistance of the apartheid regime, contextual theological subjects, namely Liberation Theology, Black Theology and African Theology, were introduced to challenge and oppose apartheid theology. Although these theologies played a pivotal role in challenging apartheid and advocating for social justice, their prominence declined after the country gained independence in 1990. The main reason for this regression was the perception that the primary struggle against racial oppression had been resolved.

The ULTS–Paulinum curriculum was revised in 2022, a move seen as a significant moment of institutional self-examination. The addition of the Context stream, the strengthening of Theological Seminars, and the introduction of Feminist and Womanist Theologies reflect an awareness that theological education must respond to contemporary realities of inequality, gender injustice, unemployment and shifting cultural dynamics. These developments suggest a determination to reaffirm orthodoxy along with *orthokardia* and orthopraxis, and train leaders capable of meaningful public witness. But structural adjustment by itself does not constitute epistemological transformation. The continued

dominance of Western theological sources which limit the mainstreaming of African scholarship, insufficient integration of gender justice across disciplines, and the imbalance between academic instruction and practical ministerial formation indicate that deeper renewal is still required.

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Critical Pedagogies in Anti-Colonial Cultural Work: Oudano as Praxis

Nashilongweshipwe Mushaandja

Abstract:

The nexus of pedagogy and culture was central to the work of intellectuals, artists and educators in the Namibian struggle against apartheid. The archives of their popular culture show the pedagogical practices that emerged from cultural processes which have had the potential for transformative education. However, these archives of popular education are largely forgotten in post-apartheid Namibian educational discourse. This article is informed by a close listening to archival musical material and reading of visuals by cultural workers during the struggle against apartheid. Using archival research, the study provides a sketch of creative pedagogical practices that emerged from this cultural work, situating them in the indigenous concept of performance known as “oudano”. The article discusses oudano as a praxis which mobilises critical pedagogy. The paper argues that the culture of song and printmaking in an anti-colonial context is not exclusive to this period, and that it remains critically useful in post-apartheid Namibian discourse on decolonised education.

Keywords: *oudano*, critical pedagogy, cultural work, praxis, living heritage

Introduction

This article engages with archives of cultural works, some produced in Namibia and some in exile, emphasising the ways in which they mobilise the ideals of critical pedagogy. This includes Enoch Sontonga’s hymn *Nkosi sikelel’ iAfrika*, which was continually deployed by African liberation movements as a source of liberation praxis. Most of the archives discussed in this article are the prints of Namibia’s most celebrated artist, John Ndevasia Muafangejo. The analysis focuses on Muafangejo’s three linocut prints produced in the early 1970s, illustrating his imagining of “education for liberation” and access to education, as well as reflecting on the role of living heritage in education. The study listens to the rhythm of Sontonga’s hymn and reads Muafangejo’s prints as art historical interventions that hold decolonial potential in post-apartheid Namibia, where transformative educa-

tional discourse has underestimated and undermined the role of arts and culture.

The decolonising potential of the cultural works in this article is discussed from the point of view of critical pedagogy rooted in critical theory. Critical pedagogy is understood as a transformative educational philosophy which encourages and enables students and teachers to critically examine and question power structures, as well as inequality and oppression (Freire, 2007; Giroux, 2005). It is fundamentally concerned with making education a process of critical consciousness, and it is achieved through dialogic action and agency (Freire, 1972). Critical pedagogy relies on popular culture primarily for its ability to forge embodied learning, and this is why this paper's objects of analysis are forms of popular culture. Both Freire (2005) and Giroux (2005) saw educators as cultural workers who must make use of 'alternative cultures' to achieve the goals of transformative education.

In this article, the theory of critical pedagogy is put in conversation with an African concept of performance, known as *oudano*. This paper situates *oudano* within an expansive framework for creating and archiving performance as a human practice. *Oudano*—an Oshiwambo and Rukwangali word—implies play, performance, and performativity as processes of

enculturation. Culturally, *oudano* is a term that is used to refer to a range of social activities for the purposes of rituals, learning, leisure, labour, sports, politics, religion, festivities, and commemorations. *Oudano* comes from the word *dana* (play), the verb being *okudana* (to play). *Oudano* thus refers to play-driven secular and sacred rituals that combine dance, music, drama, visual arts, and literature to facilitate everyday social functions (Mans, 1997, 2017). This article unpacks different forms of *oudano* practice (a song and linocut prints) to argue for an understanding of *oudano* as a fluid praxis of indigenous cultural production that is mobilised through play, publicness, protest, place, archive, sound, and ritual, and therefore constitutes a critical pedagogy.

Oudano as Praxis and Critical Pedagogy: A Conceptual Framework

Oudano is embodied. This includes its orality, which is a central feature in indigenous music, dance, and storytelling practices. *Oudano* is ritualised behaviour, often taking various forms in Aawambo social events such as *efundula* (women's initiation rite); *oshipe* (harvest); and *oudano wokoluvanda* (moonlight dances). It is, however, important to note that *oudano* is not a term limited to Oshiwambo, as it also exists as a cultural practice in other languages

and performances. It is through this transcultural view that we can experiment with the critical usefulness of this concept by exploring its capacity to function as a translocal concept of (decolonial) cultural production.

Oudano is also referred to as *mutambo* in Shona, *motshameko* in Setswana, and *dala* in Afrikaans slang. These terms are conceptual drivers of play that refer to a range of cultural performances as practised in everyday activities. Oudano is what contemporary performance and cultural studies scholars such as Agawu (2007), Chinyowa (2005), hooks (1995), and Mans (2017) have read as African and African diasporic performance practices as vehicles of historic, spiritual, political, and educational work. This scholarship on performance is situated in the fields of literature, theatre, musicology, and choreology.

Oudano privileges an ethos of communality and holistic participation

that would generally be reflected in the feeling, structure, and content of its sound and movement. African music scholar Kofi Agawu (2007) refers to techniques such as call-and-response, repetition, and improvisation as expressions of that communal ethos among the Ewe of Ghana. These performance techniques and the ethos of communality traditionally characterise oudano practices such as *oyimbo* (songs) and *oidano* (dances). The Namibian ethnomusicologist Minette Mans (2017) also highlights the notion of playing together in her discussion of oudano wokoluvanda, also known as “women’s moonlight or entertainment play” (Mans, 2017, p. 94). This oudano practice—which involves dancing, drumming, singing, and clapping hands—is often performed in open spaces. This ethos of communality is also marked in the basic structure of several oudano dances amongst the Aawambo. Mans (1997) writes, “In Oudano, for example, the basic structure - rhythmic



Oudano as an indigenous dance. Illustration by Nambowa Malua

singing, foot and drumming patterns - is fixed. But the individual movements, the melodies and texts, the total length, these constantly change.” (Mans, 1997, p. 123).

This structure is common in many African languages of performance, and can be seen in *mutambo*, as theorised by Kennedy Chinyowa (2005) in his PhD study, *Manifestations of Play as Aesthetic in African Theatre for Development*. Chinyowa defined *mutambo* as play that denotes “... a form of human symbolic interaction performed for its own purposes and/or for the understanding of existence” (Chinyowa, 2005, p. 5). Chinyowa uses the term ‘aesthetic’ to read play as a phenomenon of public culture that is dynamic and plural. *Mutambo* is read for its discursive, participatory, and dialogical functions, which manifest as playful aesthetic (Chinyowa, 2005). Chinyowa draws our attention to the artistic features of play, such as freedom, imagination, secrecy/disguise, space, rules, and enjoyment to understand Shona cultural expressions such as *ngano* (folktales), *detembo* (praise poetry), *mahumbwe* (children’s games), and *nyau* (masquerade) as forms of *mutambo*.

The process of ‘playing’, which takes multiple forms of performing, can be understood as a crucial critical pedagogy. This process produced what

critical pedagogues have termed ‘praxis’. The paper is therefore an exploration of how and why we must look at *oudano* as a praxis in its method(s) of theorising in practice, or theorising that which has been practiced. Conquergood’s (2002) theorising of performance studies speaks to the heart of *oudano* praxis, highlighting its practical, theoretical and reflexive implications. He stressed that performance studies hold a unique position because of its threading together different modes of knowing production. This is because performance as a social activity makes space for what Conquergood (2002, p. 152) called the “crisscrossing lines of activity and analysis”. The broad spectrum of performance allows us to think of performance as a work of imagination, an object of analysis, a method of inquiry and intervention in the struggle for social justice. Conquergood suggests “... the three a’s of performance studies: artistry, analysis, activism. Or to change the alliteration, a commitment to the three c’s of performance studies: creativity, critique, citizenship (civic struggles for social justice)” (Conquergood, 2002, p. 152).

By approaching performance this way, we also reconcile multiple modes of cultural and historical processes that are embedded in the principles of border crossing, ownership, agency, self-determination, and critical consciousness, as put forward by critical pedagogues

such as Paulo Freire (1972) and Henry Giroux (1992). Border pedagogy as a conceptual framework connects to how *oudano* works as a pedagogical framework. Border pedagogy, which is part and parcel of critical pedagogy as theorised by Giroux (1992), points us to the politics of dis/location and dis/placement which have been useful in framing cultural production. This theorisation is useful for this study as dis/location and dis/placement potentially speak to the pedagogical nature of popular culture, as highlighted by Giroux (1992). In Giroux's discussion on decolonising the body, co-authored with Roger I. Simon (1992), they ask the questions below to help us think of varying and shifting forms of popular culture as ways of border crossings.

Critical pedagogy frames praxis as a meeting point of theory, practice and critical reflection.

Giroux's (2005) writing on border pedagogy, particularly on decolonising the body, encourages educators to consider both meaning and pleasure as useful sources of a transformative education. He not only suggests that we read a range of popular cultures as pedagogical vehicles, but also notes that border crossing as an act of a larger intellectual project is a necessary political project based on postmodern, feminist and Marxist principles. Giroux advocates for critical consciousness,

culturally and pedagogically, as also suggested by Freire (1972).

According to Paulo Freire the teacher is "... an artist, but being an artist does not mean that he or she can make the profile, can shape the students. What the educator does in teaching is to make it possible for the students to become themselves" (Horton & Freire, 1990, p. 181). This teacher-artist analogy is useful for thinking about the role of culture and creativity in teaching, as well as the inherent pedagogical potential of art practice. As one of the pioneer critical pedagogues of the late 20th century, Freire has stressed the critical role that culture plays in shaping a society's educational system.

Freire (1972) considers the work of dialogic action to be a everyone's right. This is particularly true in the world of cultural work which tends to be on the forefront of social justice. It is for this reason that he strongly argues for the oppressed to be on the forefront of reclaiming their right to speak. Here, dialogue is an existential necessity which implies that it cannot take place if spaces of learning and culture are not aimed at forging people's agency and ownership. In the ideological formation of Namibian and African liberation, learning and culture were to be practices of freedom. In Freirean terms, learning and culture become practices of freedom when there is

love, for people and social justice. Love is discussed as a commitment to the other and a courage to change the world, the opposite of fear (Freire, 1972). Placing emphasis on love in defining dialogue as a transformative force is highly relevant for cultural work given its affective and embodied dimensions. For example, the artistic works discussed in this article are examples of dialogic action that result from a deep love for creativity and freedom.

Critical pedagogy is concerned with developing critical consciousness in spaces of learning and culture, which means encouraging analysis and questioning of societal norms and power structures. It involves enabling critical engagement with content. In the context of this paper, critical consciousness is evoked during the making and consumption processes of the artwork. Freire named it *conscientização* and discussed it as an awareness that is developed through a process of critiquing social reality, which includes making connections between lived experiences and the broader contexts (Freire, 1972). The opposite of this problem-posing education is what Freire termed the ‘banking’ approach to education, which re-enforces domination and structural oppression. Freire critiques the banking system because it is anti-dialogic and it treats subjects of learning and

culture as empty and knowledge-less. The artistic archives in this paper are examples of situated knowledge that is dialogic, emerging from contexts of banking education, specifically apartheid’s Bantu education system and its coloniality of knowledge.

Methodology

Using archival research, this paper gathers and reads historical cases of anti-colonial cultural work which served as pedagogical processes in their contexts of the struggle for liberation. It includes looking at an archive of musical productions of the South West African People’s Organisation (SWAPO) recorded in exile during the 1980s, paying particular attention to the popular hymn *Nkosi sikelel’ iAfrika*, which was adopted and re-written to become SWAPO’s national anthem. Additionally, it also looks at three of John Muafangejo’s linocut prints from the 1970s. This includes one about his experience of being excluded from the University of Cape Town’s art school, and another about Oshikwanyama-speaking women’s initiation ceremonies, reading them as representations of modern and indigenous systems of education. The third print shows his advocacy for access to education during his time as a teacher at St. Mary’s Mission High School. The paper shows how we can read the critical pedagogical efforts in the making of these cultural works, and

their circulations across various publics and periods. Here critical pedagogy as anticolonial work is shaped by praxis, which, as the paper argues, is embodied in the acts of drumming, dancing, praying and printmaking. The paper goes beyond the colonial period by briefly demonstrating how these archives, concepts and practices have been translated into Namibia's post-independence period to make claims and interventions for decolonising education in post-apartheid Namibia. It does so by referencing practical examples of hands-on studies that suggest the critical usefulness of the concepts *oudano* and *ngoma* in education curricula. These concepts are contextualised as indigenous, and forms of living heritage.

Oudano, Prayer and Liberation Pedagogy

Namibian archives of cultural work that was produced as part of the struggle against apartheid both at home and in exile are largely inaccessible and under-researched. Whether embodied or institutional, these archives remain scattered and under-explored, particularly in spaces of teaching and learning. One such archive is the audio collection of the late Sabine Zinke (1941–1994), a music teacher from the German Democratic Republic (GDR) who worked in SWAPO's cultural and educational programmes in Angola and Germany. Between 1981 and 1989,

Zinke made audio recordings of songs performed by various musical groups in the SWAPO exile camps in Lubango and Kwanza Sul, as well as children's homes in Berlin and Strassfurt. This archive is currently based at the Berlin State Archive, as well as the National Archives of Namibia. It consists of about 100 audio recordings of songs performed by bands, choirs and traditional dance groups, and at mass rallies. This musical material includes original compositions and as well material that has been adapted from existing traditional and religious songs from home.

German scholar Ulrike Kiessling, who exposed and provided me with access to this archive, referred to its musical material as an example of liberation pedagogy that was made possible through socialist solidarity. It is through the international solidarity with African liberation movements that Zinke was able to do these recordings. For Kiessling to read them as liberation pedagogy is to read them as a critical pedagogy, because the music was aimed at building the anti-apartheid movement and mobilising the masses in the fight against apartheid. These SWAPO songs are typical examples of *oudano* in their form and structure. Take one unusual example of *oudano* which has been adopted from Christianity, which is the hymn *Nkosi sikelel' iAfrika*. In SWAPO's public

culture, as is audible in the Zinke collection, this hymn was adopted with rewritten lyrics to become SWAPO's anthem. My discussion of the hymn will not focus on its lyrical content as such, but rather on the original prayer and its circulation, as well as its pedagogical potential. This is because the prayer and its melody have been used widely in African liberation movements to do the work of liberation pedagogy.

Decolonial scholar Maldonado-Torres (2017) writes about prayer in oration as a form of agency for decolonial thinking. He specifically refers to Frantz Fanon's "O my body, always make of me a man who questions!" (Fanon, 2008, p. 205) as a state of embodying vulnerability in the process of self-critique—the critique of coloniality and the pursuit of decolonial love (Maldonado-Torres, 2017). "The prayer is for the body to serve as a site of questions, for which it has to shed the 'masks' that colonial subjects wear in order to attempt to appear as human in a context defined by coloniality" (Maldonado-Torres, 2017, p. 125). This unmasking is how the body becomes vulnerable, opening to its dialogic potential. The body as a subject emerges as a site of inquiry through which it is able to "... touch the other, feel the other, discover each other" (Maldonado-Torres, 2017, p. 125). This decolonial love is the same kind of love ethic that Freire (1972)

refers to in his discussion of dialogic action. Maldonado-Torres reminds us that these conditions of unmasking the body make it possible for the oppressed to join the revolutionary struggle.

Prayer is a revolutionary tool in any social movement, and at the same time, we must also be aware of how it can be practised in oblivion and naivety. In fact, it is opposed to this background of prayer and vulnerability and works towards radical consciousness, as discussed above by Maldonado-Torres. The genealogy of the popular Xhosa classic *Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika*, composed by Enoch Sontonga in 1897, is one great example of a Christian hymn that was eventually adapted by early African anticolonial movements as a lament, and to mobilise political action (Gillespie & Naidoo, 2019). This song was translated into various African languages and used as the national anthem of Zimbabwe, Zambia, Tanzania and South Africa. The melody of this hymn has also been used as the anthem of SWAPO. This hymn also emerged in Fallist¹ protests through student activists such as Koketso "KK" Poho (Wits University) who reimagined and rearranged parts of the anthem, adapting and adding to its melodic and

1 Fallism refers to the #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall student movements (2015–2016) for free and decolonised education in South Africa. This Fallist moment of public pedagogy forged the decolonial turn in global academic spheres.

lyrical content (Gillespie & Naidoo, 2019). This shows how spirituality is significant in the context of the work of any social movement. The performance and performativity of prayer transcend material circumstance by tapping into emotive aspects of the human body. These dimensions are sites of survival, resistance, resilience, and freedom. Gillespie and Naidoo (2019) capture this when they write, “The students used the song to redefine the nation as still in struggle, still seeking to end apartheid and its long colonial inheritance” (Gillespie & Naidoo, 2019, p. 228).

Spiritual work in African movements goes beyond Christian hymns. In fact, African spirituality has been a source of knowledge for many popular struggles against colonialism. For example, in the First Chimurenga² of 1896 – 1897, Mbuya Nehanda was one of the Zimbabwean spiritual leaders who fought against British colonialism (Gonye, 2013). After the colonial forces captured her, she refused to convert to Christianity and was therefore hanged. Mbuya Nehanda “... defiantly performed a traditional dance and prophesied that ‘my bones will rise,’ meaning another Chimurenga ‘uprising’ would follow” (Gonye, 2013, p. 65). The Second

Chimurenga and Third Chimurenga both turned to Nehanda’s prophecy as a way of continuing the unfinished work of the liberation struggle. This was done through Pungwe meetings (all-night gatherings of the community) which hosted dance practices such as Kongonya that facilitate spiritual possession and have therapeutic significance in the context of chimurenga (Gonye, 2013; Chinyowa, 2001).

John Muafangejo as Teacher-Student in Pursuit of Study

The name and work of the prolific Namibian artist John Ndevasia Muafangejo have been at the centre of Namibian art histories and discourses both during and after apartheid. Muafangejo was born on 5 October 1943 in Etunda lo Nghadi, southern Angola—part of the Owambo territory that was divided by the colonial carving



Oudano as an indigenous game. Illustration by Nambowa Malua

2 *Chimurenga* is a Shona word for the liberation struggle and war against British colonialism in Zimbabwe.

up of Africa. Muafangejo received his art education in South Africa, at the Evangelical Lutheran Art and Craft Centre in Rorke's Drift, KwaZulu Natal, from 1967 to 1969 (Mtota, 2015; Palumbo, 2005). Muafangejo's work became widely known in the world of contemporary art after he had won several international prizes and held exhibitions since the 1970s (Mtota, 2015; Palumbo, 2005). Muafangejo went on to become an educator at St. Mary's Odibo High School during the 1970s, a role which can be read in his practice of making art.

Muafangejo (1971) illustrates institutional borders in his 1974 linocut print, *An Interview of Cape Town University in 1971*. This print is an autobiographical image by Muafangejo reflecting on his unsuccessful interview to study at the Michaelis School of Fine Art, University of Cape Town (UCT) in 1971. He is reflecting on the structural exclusion, historically executed by white and predominantly male gatekeepers in the South African academy. He reflects on the white head-centred form of pedagogy, as can be seen in Figure 1 below.

The table in official or formal arts education establishes a divide and hierarchy between those who sit around it, and the interviewee. In this print, the table is a head-centred device used by the professors (interviewers)

to disembody Muafangejo by reducing him to the spoken word and his portfolio to justify why he should get access to the UCT. The intimidating interviewers are holding pens, paint brushes and a book that could be Muafangejo's portfolio. Their eyes stand out, in a way symbolising the white colonial gaze on the black artist's body. Muafangejo is positioned lower at the one end of the table, under observation and being cross-examined under the gaze of the write "phalanx of interviewers" which "suggests a single authoritative narrative wielded by the pale faced custodians of the institution" (Mistry & Mabaso, 2021, p. 2).

An Interview of Cape Town University in 1971 (Muafangejo, 1971) speaks well to the 2015/2016 student movements in South Africa calling for decolonisation and accessible education, such as *Fees Must Fall* and *Rhodes Must Fall*. The print is relevant in both post-apartheid Namibia and South Africa today because it points us to the burden of coloniality and the necessary project of decolonising the neo-liberal university. One might wonder where border crossing is depicted in this print. The print is a response to his experience of being othered and excluded. Mistry and Mabaso (2021) contend that this kind of othering and exclusion is prevalent in post-apartheid South African academies such as UCT. These art historians ask what this 1974 print

reveals about seeing and being seen, as well as hearing and being heard. They hint towards epistemologies that require deep listening and recognising different experiences and knowledge. Reading Muafangejo's subjectivity in this image, Mistry and Mabaso (2021, p. 8) note: "The artist sits at the head of the table. He is bearer of a system of knowledge unknown to his audience." They question the audience and their complicity in white privilege, and whether they take on the responsibility for recognising subjugated knowledges.

Mistry and Mabaso (2021) write about historic strategies and initiatives by southern African artists whose

works call in decolonisation of artistic practices and pedagogies. They draw us to the questions about contested ontologies and epistemologies in South African art schools. A copy of the *An Interview of Cape Town University in 1971* (Muafangejo, 1971) was acquired by UCT's Works of Art Collection in 1989. Considering how this image has re-emerged in decolonial discourses at the turn of Fallism, the UCT Works of Art Committee has yet to properly contextualise this artwork as part of the university's long history of segregation. Part of the text that accompanies an image of the artwork in the university's online catalogue reads as follows.

This image is ambiguous; the group's raised pens (or might they be paintbrushes?) have nothing to write on; the two women look decidedly out of place (looking quite playful compared to the solemn gentlemen). (Interview at UCT, 2022, August 06)



*Illustration of John Muafangejo by
Hage Mukwendje.*

It goes without saying that this is one of many artworks in the university's collection that have yet to be properly contextualised. However, this raises the question of what it means for the university to be in possession of artworks like *An Interview of Cape Town University in 1971* (Muafangejo, 1971) while still perpetuating the same systemic inequalities. Muafangejo received an art education at Rorke's

Drift in KwaZulu Natal, South Africa. Azaria Mbatha, one of his teachers, had a distinct influence on his visual vocabulary.

Muafangejo's (1973) print *St. Mary's Mission High School students are Very Thirsty and Hungry for Education* is another notable artwork which depicts the struggle for democratic participation in education at the height of apartheid in Namibia, then still South West Africa. In this print, Muafangejo plays with words such as "thirsty" and "hungry" to symbolise the inequalities that many black pupils were facing at the time. The hunger and thirst which Muafangejo describes as a lack of teachers also implies a coloniality of knowledge. We can make sense of this by referring to how the feminist author bell hooks writes about her thirst when she encountered Paulo Freire's work. She writes, "I came to Freire thirsty, dying of thirst (in that way that the colonised, marginalised subject who is still unsure of how to break the hold of the status quo, who longs for change, is needy, is thirsty)..." (hooks, 1994, p. 50). In appreciation of Paulo Freire's work, hooks expressed that she found his work on critical pedagogy to be a means of quenching her thirst, and that drinking from Freire's well afforded her an intimacy and familiarity (hooks, 1994). Muafangejo's imagination of the thirsty and hungry students at St. Mary's Mission High School depicts the

intimacy and familiarity that bell hooks reflects on. He does not only portray the students as deprived because of their circumstances, but he also shows hope and love for education. For Freire, hope and love are precursors to education for liberation. Muafangejo visualises love and hope in the faces of the students who are gathered in waiting lines, facing different directions. The gathered bodies are bodies in dialogue.

As a teacher at St. Mary's Mission High School at the time, Muafangejo sees himself through his students' lived experiences. He identifies with their struggles. He identifies as the Anglican artist who is appealing to higher institutions of learning, and as the student teachers who come to their rescue. Muafangejo ends his storytelling by highlighting that the inequality he represents in this 1973 print is a question of study. Here, study and studying are pursuits of inquiry. The print itself is also a form of study, given its artistic and analytical potential as a historical source that tells us about the struggle for education for all in a highly unequal context. From today's perspective, we are able to read the print and be reminded that post-independence issues such as the scarcity of educational resources are not new, but ones that are rooted in a longer history of unequal access and apartheid of knowledges. The print itself is testament to how educators

and students have continued resisting apartheid, as well as imagining and practising freedom. St. Mary's Mission High School holds a significant position in Namibia's educational history and the struggle for independence. It was where liberation struggle figures such as Andimba Toivo ya Toivo and Netumbo Nandi-Ndaitwah were educated and conscientised—in fact, Nandi-Ndaitwah was a student of Muafangejo. Due to increased mobilisation against apartheid by workers and students, the school became a fertile ground for revolutionary organising, which subsequently led to many students and teachers going into exile.

Ongoma and Learning through Living Heritage

The term '*ongoma*' in Namibia's northern languages and cultures refers to a range of drums that are manufactured and played in rituals of teaching and learning. These percussive drums and associated instruments that are used in festivals, ceremonies and rites of passage had to go underground following the arrival of missionaries and colonialists in the 1800s (Mans, 2002). Drumming cultures were labelled as uncivilised because they were central to indigenous schooling and healing systems across the African continent. In Namibia's northern regions bordering Angola, Zambia, Botswana and Zimbabwe, there is a concentration of drum making and playing practices,

many of which have survived cultural invasion for centuries of the European civilising mission (Mans & Olivier, 2005). We can refer to *okangoma* (small drum) and associated percussive instruments such as *erose* (kudu horn) that are used for healing ceremonies amongst Ovahimba and Ovazemba of Kunene region. In Ohangwena Region, the large *eengoma* (plural of *ongoma*) are carved and used in *efundula* and ordainship ceremonies. In the Kavango regions, the phrase '*daya ngoma*' expresses an invitation for drumbeats which activate the traditional dances, such as *epera*.

All of these drumming cultures form part of *ngoma*, the epistemology of holistic learning and an ecosystem of music, dance, medicine, and the universe. In African Performance Studies, *ngoma* praxis includes *IsiNgqi neSandi* (energy, rhythm, vibration and sound) as tools for healing and therapy in South Africa, as well as traditional dance, poetry and jazz for national cultural memory in Tanzania (Koela, 2025; Askew, 2002). Koela suggests that *ngoma* as a praxis of consciousness is forged through embodied and experiential forms of learning. *Ngoma* as a praxis of thinking, doing and reflecting has not received extensive academic attention. Minette Mans' (1997) doctoral dissertation on the application of *Ngoma* as an epistemology of reforming Namibia's

arts education stands as a notable academic source. Another recent interesting doctoral study is by Liveve (2022), which considers integrating Kavango drum making and playing practices into the teaching of Science in Namibian schools. These two dissertations offer useful roadmaps which we can use as indigenous frameworks for decolonising school curricula in Namibia.

What is the critical and anticolonial work of ongoma? This question can be addressed by considering how eengoma (plural of ongoma) survived missionary and colonial suppression. Amukugo (1993) reminds us that the African traditional education system in precolonial Namibia was made up of initiation processes which were spaces of intergenerational dialogue. It is within these initiations in which ongoma would be played. We could speculate that one reason why ongoma avoided colonial erasure is because it holds the potential to cross borders both materially and sonically. This potential includes both the shared cultural practices across ethnic and national borders, and the sound of a beating drum's ability to travel across geographies and temporalities. The custodianship of ongoma was not contained to these northern regions of Namibia. Exiled Namibians encountered other eengoma in Angolan, Zambian and Congolese

cultures which they adopted and adapted to their repertoires of the liberation struggle. This okangoma is audible in some of the liberation songs in the Sabine Zinke collection, used by SWAPO women's and children's performance groups. These groups performed *oidano* (Oshiwambo song-dances) that became known as *ondilimani*, specifically teaching SWAPO's ideology of liberation and Pan-Africanism. Another historical trace of ongoma's spillage into Christian evangelism can be found in 1980s recordings archived in the International Library of African Music, of Catholic nuns performing biblical songs with okangoma in Oshikuku, in Omusati Region. It is not surprising that ongoma is being used within a Christian context because liberation theology played a significant role during Namibia's anticolonial periods.

Muafangejo depicted ongoma in two of his prints, *Kuanyama Wedding* (Muafangejo, 1970) and *A Kuanjama Wedding* (Muafangejo, 1973) which both depict efundula in motion. Both prints show performances of men beating drums and women dancing in a ritual of efundula. Most of Muafangejo's work, including the ones discussed above include writings that usually describe the action that is visualised. Muafangejo describes the bodies and cultural objects in this embodied act of dancing. He notes

how well trained the drummers are, and their role in activating the dance. Even though he refers to the brides and bridegrooms that he depicts, efundula is not a wedding in the sense of two people getting married. Rather, it places more emphasis on the girl initiates' process of gaining new status. In other words, they can gain the social status of women without necessarily being married to a man.

Efundula as an initiation school teaches women skills related to spiritual, social and economic life. There are several studies in southern Africa that place initiation rites and modern education in conversation with each other. These studies highlight both positive and negative contributions of young people's initiation rites to modern education systems in South Africa, Mozambique and Angola (Domingos, 2025; Manlia, 2025; Kaseke & Luvala, 2025). This scholarship points to the disjuncture between the modern and indigenous systems of education, emphasising that the systems can complement one another. Initiation rites have been subject of intense public debate in contemporary societies in Africa. In Namibia, there has been a critique of *olufuko* (efundula in Omusati Region), which has become a state-sponsored cultural festival. Kuoppala (2021) reminds us that human rights, child protection and fundamental religious

groups have been arguing that the rite promotes child marriage and therefore violates the dignity of the girl child. This tension reveals that oudano, as a method in olufuko is implicated in patriarchal values. However, the proponents of olufuko have pushed back against the criticism, highlighting that the critics are ignorant to the transformative potential of the rite (Kuoppala, 2021). It is also worth noting that the critics of olufuko have criticised the rite from a distance, a problematic point of view of modernity, which underestimates African cultural consciousness. This is not to say that olufuko or oudano are exceptional and therefore cannot be influenced by patriarchal control. It is rather to point us to the misconceptions of the rite which are rooted in colonial modernity and Christian evangelism.

Muafangejo's critical pedagogy in his practice of printmaking about the drumming and dancing in efundula initiation is visible in various ways. Firstly, it is critical and anticolonial to imagine and visualise efundula given its pagan and "uncivilised" status in the eyes of colonial and mission education. By making prints about oudano in efundula, Muafangejo is demonstrating his awareness of different schooling systems, showing efundula as one of these systems. In his other print, he visualises the environment of his arts education in *Natal Where the Art School Is* (Muafangejo, 1968). The pedagogical

dimensions of these prints are in their historical materiality, these dimensions circulate and become useful teaching material across different contexts. This is the case with Muafangejo's entire body of work, which became seminal in training artists in post-apartheid Namibia at institutions such as the John Muafangejo Art Centre, the College of the Arts, and the University of Namibia.

In this paper, the praxis of the production of songs, prayers, dance, and prints is read as critical a pedagogical act, because such acts are counter-colonial logics, leaning towards liberation. The paper has thus far paid attention to these acts to signal oudano's conceptual and philosophical potential in different educational spaces. The skills of performing and the craftsmanship of drum making and printmaking are forms of living heritage, which is also known as intangible cultural heritage (ICH). Living heritage also refers to oral traditions and expressions, rituals, and festive events, as well as knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe passed on from one generation to the next. The paper proposes considering oudano and ngoma as concepts of living heritage that can be integrated in Namibian school curricula beyond the arts and culture subjects. Living heritage is a popular concept and term in global

education circles, and it is being championed all over the world. One example of this is UNESCO's *Projects for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage*, which was aimed at capacitating educators on teaching with ICH. Implemented in 2023–24 in Namibian and Zimbabwean schools by the respective education ministries, the project had the goal of supporting transmission of ICH through a whole-school approach that enhances dialogue, innovation and creativity. The whole school approach implies a process of teaching and learning that includes ICH practitioners, communities, events, organisations, school managers, policy makers, teachers, and learners. The UNESCO project capacitated educators and developed a methodology of teaching with living heritage, as well as a formative assessment.

In Namibia, primary schools in the Khomas, Karas, Zambezi and Omaheke regions participated in the whole school pilot implementation by identifying local forms of living heritage and teaching with it across various subjects. Teaching with living heritage is different from teaching about heritage. Liveve's (2022) experiment of using ngoma to indigenise the science curriculum is a good example of teaching with living heritage. Liveve recounts how drum making activities led to Grade 10 Physics

teachers understanding concepts such as amplitude, wavelength, crests and troughs. More Physics concepts were reflected in music and dance related to drumming: “Tension and diameter versus frequency, pitch and tune of the amplitude, and the wavelength of the softness and loudness of a sound wave when drums are played” (Liveve, 2022, p. 165).

The difference between the UNESCO project and Liveve’s PhD experiment is that the UNESCO framing of living heritage does not mention the displacement caused by colonial and missionary projects. Liveve’s project recognises that to redress the injustices of the colonial era, indigenous knowledge systems should be integrated in the education system. In reference to the work of the abovementioned UNESCO project as well as Liveve’s exceptional study, we can see the critical usefulness of indigenous and anticolonial cultural work in educational processes. The examples of cultural work discussed in this section also shows that there is a continuity in the use of oudano and ngoma from the apartheid period to post-independence spaces of anticolonial learning and culture. Although this usage is fragmented and disjointed, it is evident that the role of public culture and heritage remains central to the development of education.

Conclusion

This paper has presented and analysed several cases of critical pedagogical work in cultural action during the struggle against apartheid. As an art historical study, the paper looks at these cases as oudano archival material accessed from digital and institutional platforms. An African liberation hymn and three 1970s linocut prints by John Muafangejo are unpacked as objects of dialogic action and critical consciousness, as theorised by Paulo Freire. The paper argues that this culture of song and printmaking in an anticolonial context is not exclusive to the periods in which they were created. They remain critically useful in post-apartheid Namibian discourse on decolonised education. This argument is based on reading subjects of prayer, as well as concepts such as oudano and ngoma, placing emphasis on their performative and pedagogical potential.

The key cases of oudano discussed in this paper demonstrate the different ways in which artistic and cultural work has been used to resist colonialism. This work therefore constitutes a decolonial praxis that is still very relevant to imagining pedagogies for transformative education in post-apartheid Namibia. The continuity of oudano as a cultural concept that mobilises critical pedagogy in post-apartheid Namibia is evident in key

sources with which this essay engages. On a theoretical level, the practice-oriented theses developed by Namibian scholars referenced in this paper stand out as decolonial scientific praxis. On the level of the whole school, the regional experiments of teaching about and with living heritage, as promoted by the education ministries in Namibia and Zimbabwe, as well as UNESCO, point to the relevance of oudano and associated indigenous concepts. Moreover, the reason why Namibian art schools continue to return to Muafangejo's oudano as a source of revolutionary education is because it conjures up situated knowledges which are usually located outside the hegemonic spaces of teaching and learning. All these fragmented contributions that the essay has explored represent the legitimate and valid practical examples of living heritage, even after centuries of epistemic violence.

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Decolonising Early Childhood Development in Informal Settlements: A Case Study of New Elementary Namibia and the Implementation of the Sixth National Development Plan

Kevin Wessels

Introduction

Early childhood development (ECD) plays a critical role in advancing equity and social justice in Namibia, particularly within the informal settlements of Windhoek where poverty, overcrowding, and historical inequalities continue to shape children's educational experiences. This case study examines the work of New Elementary (NE), a Namibian non-governmental organisation operating in informal settlements, to explore how decolonising approaches to ECD can support the objectives of Namibia's Sixth National Development Plan (NDP6) while addressing structural inequalities. The study explores the gap between national targets and lived realities on the ground.

Drawing on observations, interviews with educators, and engagement with community stakeholders, the study highlights the tensions between formal curriculum expectations and culturally responsive, community-based practices. It illustrates how overcrowded classrooms, underqualified teachers,

limited stipends, food insecurity, and inadequate infrastructure continue to constrain ECD service delivery. At the same time, it demonstrates how NE integrates play-based learning, storytelling, indigenous knowledge systems, and strong community participation to foster learner agency, cultural identity, and holistic development.

By situating NE's practices within the targets and indicators of NDP6,



Early childhood development faces numerous challenges in informal settlements.

Source: Kevin Wessels

particularly those focused on access, quality, and school readiness, this study puts forward the view that decolonising ECD is not only a pedagogical shift, but also a developmental necessity. It argues that decolonisation, in this context, should recognise local knowledge, and affirm children's identities, while striving to transform ECD centres into spaces of dignity and empowerment. The case study concludes that meaningful implementation of NDP6 requires investment in infrastructure and increased enrolment, as well as culturally grounded, community-driven models to advance access, equality, participation and social justice in Namibia's most marginalised communities.

Background

ECD is widely recognised as a critical foundation for lifelong learning, social participation, and economic inclusion (Britto et al., 2017; UNICEF, 2019). Research consistently demonstrates that early investment in children's cognitive, emotional, and physical development yields long-term benefits for individuals and societies alike (Grantham-McGregor et al., 2007). In Namibia, this recognition is reflected in NDP6, which positions ECD as a strategic priority under its broader goal of strengthening human capital and reducing inequality (of Namibia, 2023).

NDP6 commits Namibia to increasing ECD enrolment, improving

infrastructure, strengthening the ECD workforce, and reducing disparities in access, particularly for vulnerable populations. However, these ambitions exist alongside persistent inequalities, especially in Windhoek's informal settlements, where access to quality ECD remains limited and uneven (UN-Habitat, 2020). Children in these areas often learn in overcrowded classrooms, informal structures, and under-resourced centres, supported by facilitators who receive minimal stipends and limited professional recognition (UNICEF Namibia, 2019).

Namibia's ECD landscape is deeply shaped by its colonial and apartheid past. Under South African administration, education systems were deliberately structured to exclude indigenous populations from meaningful access to learning opportunities, particularly in early childhood (Amukugo, 2013). Early education was neither prioritised nor adequately funded for Black Namibians, with caregiving and early learning largely confined to households and communities.

Following independence in 1990, the Namibian government made significant strides in expanding access to basic education. However, ECD remained marginal within national education planning for many years, often treated as a social welfare issue rather than a core component of development (Shikalepo,

2019). This neglect disproportionately affected low-income and marginalised communities, particularly those living in informal settlements.

Windhoek's informal settlements have grown rapidly due to rural-to-urban migration, unemployment, and a chronic shortage of affordable housing (Huchzermeyer, 2011). These settlements are characterised by insecure tenure, limited access to services, and overcrowding. Within this context, ECD centres often emerge organically as community responses to childcare and early learning needs. They are typically established by women caregivers who convert informal structures, backyard rooms, or corrugated iron shacks into learning spaces.

NDP6 represents an important policy shift by explicitly identifying ECD as a development priority. Key targets include increasing ECD enrolment for children aged 0–5, expanding access to safe and appropriate infrastructure, improving quality through trained practitioners, and reducing inequality in access across socioeconomic groups (Republic of Namibia, 2023). However, these targets largely assume formalised centres with stable infrastructure and regulatory compliance. Despite serving the most vulnerable children, informal settlement ECD centres often fall outside these assumptions and remain marginal to implementation strategies.

NE Namibia operates within this policy–practice gap. The organisation focuses on rehabilitating and rebuilding ECD centres in informal settlements, while promoting learner-centred, culturally relevant approaches to early learning. NE's work challenges dominant models of ECD delivery by foregrounding community participation, indigenous knowledge, and contextual responsiveness.

Colonial Legacies, Urban Informality, and ECD

The marginalisation of ECD in informal settlements must also be understood through Namibia's colonial spatial planning. Apartheid-era urban design deliberately excluded Black Namibians from serviced urban areas, producing overcrowded townships and, later, informal settlements that persist today (Huchzermeyer, 2011). These spatial inequalities continue to shape access to public services, including early childhood education.

Informal settlements are frequently characterised as “temporary” or “illegal,” despite housing a significant and growing proportion of Windhoek's population. This framing has direct consequences for ECD provision. Because ECD centres in these areas operate outside formal planning frameworks, they are often excluded from infrastructure investment, monitoring systems, and development

funding (UN-Habitat, 2020). As a result, early learning in informal settlements remains invisible within many policy implementation processes, even when policy documents such as NDP6 explicitly prioritise vulnerable children.

Furthermore, dominant ECD models in Namibia remain rooted in Western developmental frameworks that privilege formal classrooms, standardised curricula, and English-language instruction. These models often fail to recognise indigenous child-rearing practices, communal learning, storytelling, and play as legitimate forms of early education. In informal settlements, where community-based knowledge systems remain strong, this disconnect contributes to the perception that local ECD centres are “deficient”, rather than differently structured (Smith, 2012). NE Namibia’s work challenges this deficit framing by treating informal ECD centres as sites of knowledge, care, and resilience, rather than policy problems to be corrected.

Challenges Faced by ECD Actors in Informal Settlements

Inadequate infrastructure and overcrowding

One of the most pressing challenges facing ECD centres in informal settlements is inadequate infrastructure.

Many centres operate in unsafe, poorly ventilated structures without proper sanitation, electricity, or access to clean water. Overcrowded classrooms are common, with child-to-facilitator ratios far exceeding recommended standards. This limits opportunities for play-based learning, individual attention, and inclusive practices, directly undermining early development outcomes (Urban et al., 2012).

Precarity of the ECD workforce

NDP6 identifies trained and competent ECD practitioners as a key indicator of quality. In practice, facilitators in informal settlements often receive extremely low and irregular stipends, sometimes dependent on parental contributions that fluctuate due to poverty and unemployment. Many facilitators are described as “underqualified,” despite years of experience, because they lack access to formal training pathways. This reflects the broader devaluation of care work, which is highly feminised and structurally undervalued (ILO, 2018; UN Women, 2021).

Stipend challenges and lack of professional recognition

An ECD teacher noted the following:

Many people think early childhood teaching is easy because the

children are small. They do not see the planning, preparation, and patience required. We are expected to follow curriculum guidelines, assess learners, and prepare them for primary school, but we are not always given the same professional recognition as primary or secondary school teachers.

The stipend is very low compared to the responsibilities we carry. Sometimes it feels like our work is undervalued because we are working with small children. Some teachers leave because they cannot survive on the income. This creates instability for the children. If ECD is truly the foundation of education, then the government and stakeholders must invest properly in the teachers who build that foundation.

(ECD teacher, personal communication)

Hunger, malnutrition, and learning outcomes

Hunger remains a persistent barrier to learning in informal settlement ECD centres. Children frequently arrive without having eaten, affecting concentration, emotional regulation, and participation (Grantham-McGregor et al., 2007). While NDP6 links early learning outcomes to nutrition and health, feeding schemes remain inconsistent and heavily dependent on donor

support or community contributions. This undermines children's readiness for formal schooling and contradicts national development objectives.

Policy exclusion and administrative barriers

Although NDP6 aims to reduce inequality in access to ECD, informal centres often struggle to meet registration and compliance requirements. This exclusion limits access to subsidies, training opportunities, and state-supported feeding programmes. As a result, the very centres serving the most vulnerable children remain structurally marginalised (Republic of Namibia, 2023).

Gendered care labour and the political economy of ECD

ECD provision in informal settlements is overwhelmingly sustained by women. Facilitators, caregivers, and centre founders are often mothers and grandmothers who step into care roles in response to community need rather than formal employment opportunities. Despite their central role in human development, their labour is poorly remunerated and largely unrecognised within national development frameworks.

Low stipends not only affect facilitators' livelihoods, but also undermine

the sustainability of ECD centres. Facilitators frequently leave for domestic work or informal trading opportunities that offer slightly higher or more stable income. This high turnover disrupts learning continuity and weakens relationships between children and caregivers, an essential component of ECD (Freire, 1970/2007; Smith, 2012).

NDP6 recognises the importance of human capital development, but does not sufficiently address the gendered nature of ECD labour. Without targeted interventions to professionalise, remunerate, and support ECD facilitators in informal settlements, national quality indicator targets remain difficult to achieve.

A female ECD teacher, reflecting on care work, income insecurity, and emotional labour, noted:

Working in early childhood is more than just teaching letters and numbers. We are mothers, nurses, counsellors, and sometimes even social workers. Many of the children come to school hungry or upset because of situations at home. We must comfort them before we can even begin teaching. It is emotional work. When a child cries, you carry that with you even after school. ...

The hardest part is that this work is not always recognised as

professional work. Our stipends are small and sometimes delayed. There are months when I worry about how I will pay rent or support my own children. Yet every day I come back because I know how important these early years are. We do this work with love, but love does not pay the bills. I hope one day ECD facilitators will be recognised and supported like other teachers in the education system. (ECD teacher, personal communication)

Structural hunger and the limits of learning

Hunger in informal settlements is structural, not incidental. High unemployment, food price inflation, and household poverty mean that many children rely on ECD centres as their primary sources of daily nutrition (Grantham-McGregor et al., 2007; UNICEF, 2019). When feeding schemes fail, learning is directly compromised.

Facilitators report that children who are hungry struggle to engage in structured activities, become easily distressed, or fall asleep during lessons (UNICEF Namibia, 2019). These realities contradict assumptions embedded in policy frameworks that children arrive at learning spaces with basic needs met. Although NDP6 links nutrition to educational outcomes, implementation remains fragmented, leaving ECD

centres to absorb the consequences of broader socioeconomic failures.

Actions Taken to Address the Challenges

New Elementary Namibia's interventions

NE addresses these challenges through community-driven and context-responsive interventions. The organisation rehabilitates and rebuilds ECD centres using participatory design processes and local labour, directly contributing to NDP6's infrastructure targets (Republic of Namibia, 2023). Centres are designed to support play-based and learner-centred education, incorporating outdoor learning spaces, gardens, and child-friendly layouts.

NE also supports facilitators through mentorship, informal training and advocacy, recognising experiential knowledge as a valuable form of expertise. While these efforts do not replace formal accreditation, they enhance confidence, skills, and professional identity, contributing to quality improvement indicators outlined in NDP6 (ILO, 2018; UN Women, 2021).

Community and civil society engagement

When this informal settlement first started growing, there were no

proper services here. Families built their homes from corrugated iron and wood, and children had nowhere safe to stay during the day. The ECD centre began very small, as just a few children in a makeshift structure. Parents contributed what they could, sometimes just a few coins or food.

Over the years, the centre became a symbol of hope for the community. It showed that even though we are living in an informal settlement, our children deserve education and dignity. With the support from New Elementary, the centre has improved physically and academically. But its history reminds us that it was built from community effort. It represents resilience. It reminds us that development must start with the people. (NE ECD centre parent, personal communication)

Community involvement is central to sustaining ECD centres in informal settlements. Parents, elders, and volunteers contribute time, labour and indigenous knowledge, reinforcing culturally relevant learning. Civil society organisations complement these efforts through feeding schemes, training initiatives, and advocacy for improved ECD policy implementation (Banks et al., 2015).

State- and policy-level actions

At the national level, NDP6 provides a policy framework for expanding ECD access and quality. Some progress has been made in recognising ECD as a development priority, but coordination between ministries, local authorities, and informal centres remains limited. This weak alignment constrains the realisation of NDP6 targets in informal settlement contexts (Republic of Namibia, 2023).

Decolonial practice in action: Rethinking “quality” in early childhood education

NE Namibia’s approach implicitly redefines what “quality” means in early childhood education. Rather than equating quality solely with formal certification or compliance, NE emphasises relational care, cultural relevance, and community participation (Smith, 2012).

Learning environments are designed to reflect children’s lived realities, incorporating local languages, storytelling, music, and play. Gardens serve multiple functions: they support nutrition, provide learning opportunities linked to nature and responsibility, and reinforce communal values. These practices align with indigenous knowledge systems that view child development as a holistic process rather than a purely cognitive one (Freire, 1970/2007; Smith, 2012).

Such approaches challenge dominant policy metrics while advancing the spirit, if not always the letter, of NDP6’s ECD targets.

Outcomes and Results

NE-supported centres demonstrate measurable progress toward several NDP6 objectives. Improved infrastructure has created safer and more stimulating learning environments, while enrolment has increased among children who previously lacked access to ECD services. Facilitators report increased motivation, confidence, and community recognition.

However, many challenges remain unresolved. Stipends remain inadequate, nutrition support is inconsistent, and formal recognition of informal centres is limited. While NDP6 articulates ambitious goals, implementation in informal settlements remains uneven and fragmented (Republic of Namibia, 2023).

This case study demonstrates that achieving NDP6’s ECD targets requires more than policy alignment. It requires a decolonial, justice-oriented approach that recognises informal, community-based ECD centres as legitimate partners in national development (Smith, 2012; Freire, 1970/2007). Without this shift, inequalities in early childhood education will persist,

undermining both social justice and long-term development outcomes.

Assessing progress against NDP6 indicators

When assessed against NDP6 indicators, NE-supported centres demonstrate incremental but meaningful progress. Infrastructure improvements align with targets related to safe learning environments, while increased enrolment reflects expanded access for children in informal settlements. Community involvement supports participation and local ownership, key social justice principles emphasised in national development discourse (Republic of Namibia, 2023).

However, persistent gaps remain. Facilitator remuneration, access to formal training, and sustainable nutrition support continue to fall short of policy aspirations. These gaps highlight a central lesson of this case study: policy targets alone are insufficient without implementation strategies that explicitly engage informal, community-based ECD systems.

Parent reflections

Before New Elementary came, my child was learning in a small shack made of zinc sheets. When it rained, classes were sometimes cancelled, and when it was very hot, the children

could not concentrate. I was always worried that my child was not getting the kind of education that would prepare her for primary school. Since the intervention, the classrooms are safer, cleaner, and properly structured. My child now comes home excited to tell me about stories they read, the songs they sing, and the activities they do in class. I can see her confidence growing. (NE ECD parent, personal communication)

What makes me even more grateful is that the school also thinks about parents like me. I never had the chance to complete my education because of family responsibilities and financial problems. Now, in the evenings, I attend literacy classes at the same school. I am learning to read and write better, and I feel empowered. It is not just my child who is benefiting, our whole family is. The school has given us hope and dignity. (NE ECD parent, personal communication)

Conclusion

While NDP6 articulates clear goals to expand access, improve quality, and strengthen ECD systems, the lived experiences of ECD service providers reveal persistent gaps between policy and practice. NE Namibia's work highlights the transformative potential of community-driven, learner-centred approaches grounded in dignity, inclusion, and lo-

cal knowledge. At the same time, it underscores the limits of civil society interventions in the absence of sustained state investment and systemic reform.

To advance social justice in ECD requires recognising early education as a public good, valuing care labour as skilled work, and addressing the spatial inequalities that marginalise children in informal settlements. For Namibia to meaningfully meet its NDP6 commitments, ECD must be treated not as a peripheral intervention, but as a foundational pillar of equitable national development.

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A Case Study of Parenting a Neurodivergent Child Juxtaposed against the Provisions of the Sector Policy on Inclusive Education in Namibia

Immaculate Mogotsi & Christel Menette

Abstract:

This article examines the extent to which Namibia's Sector Policy on Inclusive Education (SPIE) (Ministry of Education, 2013) is meaningfully implemented for neurodivergent learners, whose access to equitable and dignified education remains uneven despite the policy's progressive intent. The persistent gap between policy commitments and the lived realities of neurodivergent learners, in both private and public schools, necessitates critical inquiry. Grounded in the theoretical insights of Lev Vygotsky and Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory, the study adopts a qualitative approach that integrates autoethnography with an intrinsic case study. Through the intertwined perspectives of a parent and a clinical psychologist navigating schooling, assessment and support systems, the study illuminates structural and institutional barriers. These include inconsistent identification of learning differences, limited teacher preparedness, weak policy compliance, and uneven access to psychoeducational services. The study concludes that meaningful inclusion requires systemic reform,

collaborative practice, and deliberate translation of inclusive education policy into classroom-level action.

Keywords: Namibia, neurodivergent learner, dyslexia, psychological support, inclusive education, autoethnography, justice, advocacy

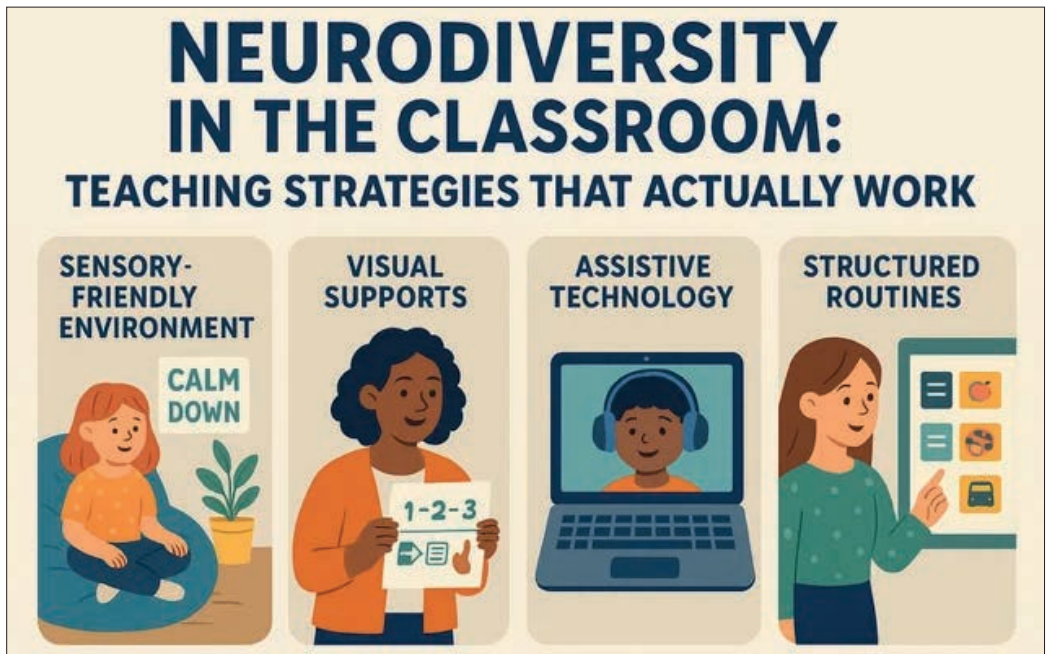
Introduction

Inclusive, equitable education has the potential to transform individuals and societies, but when policy and practice diverge, it can also reinforce inequity (United Nations 2015, p.17). Namibia's education system has moved from segregated "special" classes to inclusive classrooms, particularly since ratifying the Salamanca Declaration in 1994 (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 1994). This shift has been guided by the *Sector Policy on Inclusive Education* (SPIE) (MoE, 2013), which is shaped by evolving understandings of neurodivergence, and is currently under review. The policy commits schools to learner-centred participation for everyone. This approach also

aligns with current neurodiversity views that see neurodevelopmental differences as natural human variation (Miranda-Ojeda et al., 2025). With proper supports and opportunities, neurodivergent learners (including those with intellectual disabilities, specific learning disorders (e.g., dyslexia, dyscalculia), developmental coordination disorder (dyspraxia), tics and other motor disorders, communication and language disorders, autism spectrum conditions, and ADHD) can succeed in formal education. However, achieving this potential requires a systemic change from separate accommodations to integrated, inclusive design, backed

by well-trained educators and strong leadership.

This article aims to critically examine how Namibian school-level practices cater for the neurodivergent learner, spanning inclusion, access, pedagogy, assessment, accommodations, and collaboration, and how these respond to SPIE commitments. Using an autoethnographic lens, it traces the lived experience of a mother as she navigates the education system with her son with dyslexia. The article further incorporates reflections from a clinical psychologist working with neurodivergent children in private practice and across school sites. These intertwined narratives illuminate



Source: <https://schoolposterprinters.com/neurodiversity-in-the-classroom-teaching-strategies-that-work/>

the barriers that neurodivergent learners face, particularly when access to services and accommodations is shaped by socioeconomic privilege. The account reveals how gaps in implementation risk turning education into a driver of inequity rather than a tool for empowerment. This article contributes to a growing body of evidence that, despite progressive policy frameworks, the lived realities of neurodivergent learners in Namibia often fall short of the inclusive ideals envisioned.

Background: Framing the Mother and Psychologist Narratives in the Namibian Inclusive Education Context

The UNESCO definition of “inclusive education” is, “a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing exclusion within and from education” (UNESCO Institute for Information Technologies in Education [UNESCO IITE] 2025, p. 12). It involves changes and modifications in content, approaches, structures, and strategies, with a common vision which covers all children of appropriate age range, and a conviction that it is the responsibility of the state to put the necessary provisions in place in both policy and practice to educate all children. (UNESCO IITE 2025).

This article interrogates how Namibia’s SPIE (MoE, 2013) is enacted for neurodivergent learners, by tracing the intertwined narratives of a mother whose child was diagnosed with dyslexia in Grade 2 (age eight), and a clinical psychologist who supports such learners across school sites (Ellis et al., 2011). The policy aims to ensure that all children learn, participate fully, and experience supportive, learner-centred environments. Our account examines the distance between these ideals and day-to-day practice as the mother–child dyad navigated referrals, assessments, accommodations, and transitions, ultimately culminating in the learner’s completion of high school and pursuit of a career in aviation engineering.

To ensure that neurodivergent learners attain their full potential, there is need for a system-wide shift from add-on accommodations to embedded inclusive design. To attain this, the education system should comply with the SPIE and be supported by capacitated teachers and leadership, and by tailored supports across a broad neurodivergent spectrum (Ndou-Chikwena & Sefotho, 2025). In this article we show empirical evidence of implementation challenges in Namibian schools, and Namibian work on dyslexia and assistive technologies that point to both constraints and possibilities for inclusive pedagogy (Gouws & Wassermann, 2024; Donohue

& Bornman, 2014; Mokaleng & Möwes, 2020; Veiko, 2019).

Methodology

This article uses a qualitative, multi-method approach that combines autoethnography and an intrinsic case study to explore how the SPIE (MoE, 2013) is implemented for a neurodivergent student to thrive in Namibia. Autoethnography allows the parent–author to generate contextual data through reflective journaling, memory work, and artifacts such as school reports, assessment notes, psychological reports, and correspondence. This makes visible the emotions, negotiations, and daily decisions involved in parenting a neurodivergent child within the education system (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011; Holman, Adams, & Ellis, 2013). The case study focuses on a specific system, detailing the role of the clinical psychologist when providing services to the learner, and of the parent, teachers, school leadership, and education regulators. The methodology also included document analysis of the SPIE, school policies, and assessment reports; semi-structured interviews with the psychologist and teachers; and field notes from meetings and classroom interactions (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018; MoE, 2013).

The data analysis combined deductive policy–practice mapping

(responsiveness of access, pedagogy, assessment, accommodations, and referral pathways) with inductive thematic analysis to surface patterns of constraint and possibility (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Trustworthiness was supported through data triangulation, member checking with key participants, thick description, and an audit trail, alongside explicit reflexivity regarding positionality and power (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Ethical procedures included confidentiality, de-identification, and careful handling of potentially sensitive clinical educational information.

Theoretical framework

This article is anchored in a dual-theoretical framework integrating Lev Vygotsky’s social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978) and Erik Erikson’s psychosocial theory (Erikson, 1963), offering a multidimensional lens for understanding and supporting neurodivergent learners across developmental and educational contexts. Supporting neurodivergent learners requires a multidimensional theoretical approach that accounts for both cognitive development and psychosocial functioning. Lev Vygotsky’s social constructivism and Erik Erikson’s psychosocial theory are contextualised within Namibia’s SPIE (MoE, 2013), to frame inclusive, developmentally responsive educational practices.

Vygotsky's theory conceptualises learning as a socially mediated, culturally embedded process in which knowledge is co-constructed through interaction and scaffolded within the learner's zone of proximal development (ZPD) (the difference between what a learner can do independently and what they can achieve with guidance and support from a teacher or parent). It highlights the space where learning is most effective when tasks are slightly beyond the learner's current ability but attainable with appropriate scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1978). For neurodivergent learners whose cognitive profiles may include asynchronous development, sensory processing differences, or executive function variability, the ZPD becomes a dynamic space for tailored intervention. Scaffolded supports such as guided participation, dynamic assessment, and assistive technologies serve not as compensatory mechanisms but as cultural tools that expand access and agency. This aligns with principles of universal design for learning, reframing diversity as a resource for inclusive pedagogy rather than a barrier to normative achievement.

Complementing this, Erikson's psychosocial theory provides a developmental scaffold for understanding the emotional and identity-related trajectories of neurodivergent children. His eight-stage model illustrates how neurodivergence

may shape and be shaped by age-related developmental tasks (Erikson, 1963). In Namibia, Stages 1–3 (0–6 years) may be affected when caregivers or early childhood settings misinterpret atypical communication, behaviour, or social interaction, potentially fostering mistrust, shame, or guilt rather than confidence. Stage 4 (6–12 years), the primary school years, is often the most challenging, as standardised literacy expectations, limited inclusive pedagogy, and punitive discipline can reinforce inferiority instead of nurturing competence. Stage 5 (12–18 years) highlights risks of identity confusion among adolescents placed in "slow learner" categories or exposed to stigma. Experiences in schooling continue to influence Stages 6–8 (young adulthood to later life), shaping relationships, vocational fulfilment, and lifelong wellbeing. Across the stages, failure to master developmentally appropriate tasks, often due to environmental misalignment rather than intrinsic deficit, can predispose learners to internalised shame, guilt, or inferiority.

Overall, applying Erikson's framework reveals how systemic barriers in Namibian schools may disrupt healthy development for neurodivergent learners. While inclusive, compassionate, and developmentally attuned support can foster resilience, self-worth, and long-term flourishing (Erikson, 1963). Conversely, affirming environments that

recognise and scaffold neurodivergent strengths can buffer against adverse psychosocial outcomes and foster resilience, creativity, and self-efficacy. Together, these frameworks underscore the necessity of context-sensitive, relational, and developmentally attuned supports. Within the Namibian context, the SPIE (MoE, 2013) operationalises these principles by mandating learner-centred, flexible, and collaborative approaches that accommodate neurodiversity. When implemented robustly, such a policy can yield systemic benefits, such as earlier identification, reduced dropout, and expanded pathways to competence, while affirming the dignity and potential of neurodivergent learners.

SPIE Provisions for Neurodivergent Learners

This case study synthesises the SPIE's intent with the lived realities of parenting a neurodivergent child. The argument advanced is that inclusion must mean more than placement; it must ensure full participation, responsive supports, and dignified learning across contexts (MoE, 2013; Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture [MEAC], 2018).

Namibia's SPIE (MoE, 2013), seeks to “ensure that all learners are educated in the least-restrictive educational setting ... to the fullest extent possible” ... and to “support learners with a wide

range of individual abilities and needs”. This article adopts a neurodiversity paradigm that understands neurological differences as natural human variation rather than deficit, reframing support from “fixing” learners to designing dignified enabling environments in which diverse strengths can thrive (MoE, 2013; Enhancing Participatory Democracy in Namibia, 2023).

While not all neurodivergent individuals identify as persons with disabilities, many meet disability criteria when long-term neurological differences interact with social, institutional and environmental barriers that restrict full and equal participation. This understanding reflects the social and rights-based framework of the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (United Nations, 2006), which Namibia has ratified. The Convention conceptualises disability not solely as an individual impairment but as the outcome of the interaction between individual differences and societal barriers that limit equal participation (United Nations, 2006). Hence, national reviews also document attitudinal, curricular, and service-delivery gaps that impede full participation (MEAC, 2018).

The SPIE's core focus on diversifying teaching and learning, along with providing care and support throughout

the system, promotes differentiated instruction in classrooms and coordinated school-based support. It also emphasises the importance of timely, family-centred pathways to services so that neurodivergent learners are not merely present, but fully engaged and making academic progress (MoE, 2013; Enhancing Participatory Democracy in Namibia, 2023).

Placing this narrative within Namibia's SPIE, which envisions full participation in supportive, learner-centred environments, underscores a recurring policy-practice gap. Many school actors (and parents) are unfamiliar with the policy's provisions, leaving neurodivergent learners dependent on individual advocacy rather than systemic responsiveness (MoE, 2013). International evidence shows that inclusion improves when teachers use universal design for learning and flexible assessments. Accountability should shift from demanding one fixed way to show mastery to accepting multiple, valid ways for learners to demonstrate what they know (Global Education Monitoring Report Team [GEMRT], 2020; Rose & Meyer, 2002; Ainscow, 2005). For example, when the education system relies solely on written examinations as its dominant form

of assessment, it robs neurodivergent learners of the opportunity to be assessed using methods that reflect their strengths. These standardised literacy demands and writing expectations create uniformity in assessment methods and hence become exclusionary for neurodivergent learners. The "one-size-fits-all" requirements can misalign with how some neurodivergent learners process print, time, language, or attention, creating barriers unrelated to their actual understanding or potential. By applying appropriate accommodations for neurodivergent learners such as extra time, audiobooks/text-to-speech, reduced copying, alternative response modes (oral, typed), scaffolded notetaking, and quiet testing spaces, the scope for inclusion is broadened. Such accommodations safeguard learners' engagement, self-efficacy, and academic achievement by preventing secondary harms that may otherwise undermine their learning and overall well-being. These interventions acknowledge that neurodivergent learners may have strengths such as rich oral vocabulary, strong reasoning, design talent, and persistence, and use those assets to plan instruction (choice of texts/topics, visual organisers, project-based outputs), rather than treating them as blank slates.

Stories and Analysis: Perspectives of a Mother and a Clinical Psychologist

*Mother-son dyad in
navigating the school system
whilst making sense of
dyslexia:*

This article is co-authored by two scholars who write from distinct yet interconnected vantage points to illuminate how neurodivergent learners navigate Namibia's education system. Using a combination of autoethnography and case study methods, we braid together our lived and professional experiences to deepen understanding of the policy-practice gap in inclusive education. One author writes as a mother whose son was diagnosed with dyslexia, reflecting on the emotional, academic, and advocacy journey of supporting a neurodivergent child through the Namibian schooling system. The other author contributes the perspective of a clinical psychologist, drawing on clinical and school-based practice to interrogate structural, pedagogical, and psychosocial barriers that shape learner trajectories. Together, our dual narratives offer an intimate yet analytical account of inclusion in practice, revealing both the human cost of systemic gaps and the transformative possibilities of responsive, learner-centred support.

*Learner “misbehaviour” as a
form of coping*

As the mother of a son with dyslexia, I recall when my son's school and home lives began to deteriorate under stress. He would come home without his schoolbooks and blame a non-existent friend called “Enid”. He was also repeatedly marked absent from classes, even though, I had personally dropped him off at school in the morning. This caused a lot of frustration, especially after I learned that my son was not telling the truth about his whereabouts after I had dropped him off. On several occasions, his homework would not be done, or he would not know where his books were. Out of frustration and a loss of trust in each other, I resorted to corporal punishment to correct what I deemed laziness in schoolwork. His teachers also labelled as him “disruptive” in class.

Later, I learned he was avoiding lessons that required reading aloud. From kindergarten onward, I noticed that our son's reading lagged behind that of his peers; I also observed that when texts were read aloud, and he responded orally, he excelled. However, when required to read independently and write in timed tests, my son froze or blanked out. At that time, I had not yet understood how dyslexia was affecting his spelling, reading and writing.

It dawned on me that my son was anxious and ashamed that he could not read, despite his efforts. It was clear that what I framed as “misbehaviour” was his way of coping in the school system. He expressed much frustration towards school. The saddest thing that used to break my heart was waking him up in the morning and hearing him sigh—a sigh so deep and long, a testimony to the weight he experienced of attending school. It was at that juncture that I asked him to teach me how he preferred to be assisted with schoolwork. We started following children of his age online, adopting their coping mechanisms, and seeing whether it would work for him.

When he was in grade 2 (eight years old), the school social worker referred my son to an educational psychologist, who diagnosed him with dyslexia. We consulted numerous psychologists and remedial reading tutors with the aim of providing my son with the necessary support. I also knew that I had no clue as to how to raise and academically support a child with dyslexia. I read about the condition extensively, including *The Gift of Dyslexia* by Ron Davis (1994) (revised and expanded in 2010) and many other books, including a list of celebrities my son knew. I watched videos of parents with children with dyslexia. I also joined the Namibia Autism Association as they held lectures on the various forms of

neurodivergence, and how to navigate parenting neurodivergent children.

I became increasingly aware of my son's needs and intentionally sought interventions to help him academically. However, the search for suitable solutions came with a significant financial and emotional toll. Accessing private psychological services required a private medical aid fund, and I had to cover additional costs for specialised reading tutors and assistive devices, like a smartphone. Meaningful support also required time, energy, and logistical planning, as I regularly took him to assessments, therapy sessions, and tutoring appointments.

Dyslexia affects reading fluency. In response to this, we introduced a smartphone equipped with text-to-speech features that allowed him to take photographs of written material and have it read aloud. He would record his verbal responses on the smartphone which were then transcribed for him to copy into his schoolwork. Whether the incorporation of assistive technologies such as smartphones truly optimises learning for neurodivergent learners remains a matter of ongoing debate in the literature (Shaywitz & Shaywitz, 2020; Veiko, 2019).

Implementing the psychologist's recommendations required us to reconfigure our home routines to

reinforce learning, and to practise the strategies provided by the tutors. This process called for considerable adjustment and commitment from the entire family. Importantly, my son was an active partner in shaping what support looked like for him. He guided us on how he preferred to be assisted, which affirmed his agency and dignity in the journey.

The SPIE and its application to neurodivergent learners

Given the extent to which dyslexia affected my son's reading and writing, the psychologist recommended a scribe and reader during his exams. Guided by this recommendation, we requested accommodations, particularly a reader and a scribe during his assessment, but the school initially resisted, asserting there were "no such policy provisions in place". The school management and teachers were poorly informed about how to apply the SPIE, despite knowing that it existed and initially did not support this arrangement. There were also queries regarding the stakeholder responsible for the sourcing of a scribe and the provision of a recorder (the Ministry of Education, the school, or the parent). After sustained persuasion, the arrangement was granted, resulting in the school appointing a scribe and making an extra classroom available where my son took his exams with additional time. I supplied a video

recorder every time my son was sitting for examinations. The recorded video was submitted to the Ministry of Education for the examiner to ascertain that the responses were from my son, and not from the scribe.

With the psychologist's guidance and the school's eventual cooperation, we redesigned everyday practices: one immediate change implemented by the school was one-on-one reading with the teacher in a quieter space without other learners in the room, with staggered turn-taking for oral reading. Additionally, the strategic use of assistive tools, such as phone-based readers and a scribe at home, to independently complete homework significantly improved his academic performance. Heartened but cautious, we balanced these supports with continued, structured literacy work, so that technology scaffolded rather than replaced skill development.

Implementing policy directives seen as preferential treatment

We also encountered resistance from fellow parents and some teachers who believed I was lobbying for preferential treatment for my son during the exam. This was despite numerous psychological diagnoses that confirmed that he had dyslexia, and the SPIE's terms relating to the

provision of assistive devices. These encounters reveal the efforts I had to make as a parent to convince the school management to implement the SPIE, which stipulates that implementing its terms does not constitute preferential treatment.

This collaborative redesign of child, parent, teacher, and clinician turned discipline narratives into support plans, showing how minor, humane adjustments can transform a learning environment when we listen closely to the learner's experience. Most importantly, it preserved my son's dignity and self-confidence. Through these concerted efforts, I can attest that my son still has dyslexia, but he has learnt to navigate challenges and do what works in his context. He wakes up every morning with so much enthusiasm to go to school. He has confidence, and has built resilience to overcome whatever challenge comes his way. He is studying with a view to qualifying in aviation engineering.

Role of a clinical psychologist in finding a path for a neurodivergent learner

By making use of the autoethnography method, this paper reflects on my experiences as a clinical psychologist, situating my professional encounters and impressions alongside policy and research. It shows how collaborative,

cross-disciplinary assessment and flexible supports bridge clinical insight and classroom practice, to provide support and expand participation for neurodivergent learners (Ellis et al., 2011; GEMRT, 2020). The collaboration between schools, parents, the learner, and the psychologist makes visible the emotions, negotiations, and micro-decisions that shape access to learning. It also situates them within broader scholarly and policy conversations; it provides an analytic stance that invites schools to redesign everyday practices so that neurodivergent learners can flourish on their own terms (Ellis et al., 2011; Holman et al., 2013).

The norm in Namibian schools is to label neurodivergent learners as having a learning difficulty or being a slow or weak/poor learner, which can stigmatise them and obscure what help is needed. After this, the learner is either put in a learning support unit, where all the learners are treated as a uniform group with learning difficulties. Oftentimes, for obvious reasons, this approach is not helpful for all the learners: they are neurodiverse, not a homogeneous group; the most helpful approach would be to try and find the underlying cause of their individual neurodiversity (Kapp et al. 2013; Tomlinson, 2017).

In everyday practice, the learner's neurodiversity, their unique cognitive

profile, consistently manifests as patterns of behaviour, learning, planning, and task mastery. Thus, the line between “clinical” and “educational” approaches blurs in the lives we serve (Ellis ,et al., 2011; Holman et al., 2013). As a psychologist, during counselling, I have observed how failure to meet an expected task is often misinterpreted as a deficit that the learner must overcome, rather than as mismatches between the learner and the context. If these deficits are not addressed, they can lead to predictable negative consequences such as low self-esteem, difficulty with emotional regulation, and mental health challenges. Many neurodivergent learners seek therapy not because they are “the problem,” but because systems are not yet designed to accommodate multiple, legitimate pathways for demonstrating competence (Glazzard, 2010; Armstrong, 2010; GEMRT, 2020).

One of the most challenging factors I encountered in creating a level playing field for neurodivergent learners in Namibia is negligence and failure to refer them to the most appropriate service providers. This has led to many neurodivergent learners not being detected, the source or type of neurodivergence not being identified, and crucial opportunities for interventions being missed. Moreover, a disconnect between schools and

service providers is a significant barrier to learners being referred for the help they need. Additionally, busy schedules and packed timetables are often cited as reasons for the lack of contact or familiarity with service providers. Bottlenecks in government facilities, the high cost of private services for learners without medical aid, and the limitations of medical aid coverage are frequently mentioned as deterrents (Republic of Namibia, 2025; Sultan, 2025).

My experience as a clinical psychologist in the education sector demonstrates that well-designed, adequately supported inclusive classrooms benefit neurodivergent learners and their peers through differentiated instruction, collaborative problem-solving, and social-emotional gains, such as reduced stigmatisation and an increased sense of belonging. These classrooms also improve academic outcomes for everyone (Hehir et al., 2016; GEMRT, 2020). At the practical level, inclusive pedagogy encourages educators, therapists, and families to work together intentionally, adapting teaching to individual learner needs without lowering expectations. This approach aligns daily classroom practices with policy objectives and promotes system-wide improvements in assessment and intervention strategies (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; GEMRT, 2020).

Psychological assessment as a catalyst for inclusive and supportive education

The oversimplified labelling of the neurodivergent learner hides the complexity of their mental profiles and stigmatises their learning journey. Such mislabelling often results in students being placed in learning support units, where they are seen as a single group with broad learning challenges. This approach ignores the diversity within neurodivergent populations and risks giving the same interventions to learners with very different needs (Kapp et al., 2013; Tomlinson, 2017).

When ethically administered and contextually applied, psychological assessment is a vital tool for inclusive education. It helps close the gap between learner diversity and responsive teaching, fostering supportive and transformative environments. In Namibia, addressing systemic barriers through policy reform, resource investment, and cross-sector collaboration is vital to unlocking the full potential of assessment to promote equity, access, and learner empowerment. For neurodivergent learners whose developmental trajectories may diverge from normative expectations, assessment offers a structured, evidence-based means of identifying cognitive strengths, executive function patterns, processing styles, and emotional-behavioural dynamics that are

not readily observable in classroom settings. It enables educators and allied professionals to distinguish between intrinsic skill deficits, performance barriers, and environmental mismatches, thereby guiding more precise and equitable intervention.

In practice, the first point of referral for struggling learners is often the school counsellor or Life Skills teacher. However, these educators typically rely on informal, non-standardised assessments. They are not registered with the Health Professions Council of Namibia to administer psychodiagnostic tools (MEAC, 2018). Life Skills teachers, when properly trained, can serve as valuable referral agents in identification of neurodivergent learners, making appropriate and responsive accommodations and proper referrals to allied health professionals (Azuka et al., 2024). The current gap in diagnostic capacity leads to inaccurate identification of neurodivergent profiles, missed referrals to appropriate specialists (e.g., speech-language therapists, occupational therapists, audiologists, neurologists), and/or delayed or absent interventions, compounding academic and emotional challenges. Psychological assessment, when conducted by qualified professionals, fills this gap by offering validated insights that guide referral decisions and inform multidisciplinary collaboration.

The consequences of diagnostic oversight

Without access to accurate assessment and individualised support, learners are often moved from grade to grade without mastering foundational skills. This can lead to disengagement or demotivation, with some learners internalising failure and frustration. Eventually, some are excluded from the system due to age limits, disciplinary issues, or emotional exhaustion (Republic of Namibia, 2025; Sultan, 2025). These outcomes reflect systemic failures rather than learner incapacity. These consequences highlight the urgent need for psychological assessment as a protective and empowering tool within inclusive education.

The diagnostic precision of psychological assessment

Psychological assessment provides a structured, evidence-based alternative to broad labelling. It helps educators and related professionals identify the root cause of a learner's neurodivergence, whether related to executive function, language processing, sensory integration, or emotional regulation. Additionally, assessments distinguish between learning difficulties and neurodevelopmental conditions, preventing inappropriate placement and intervention. Moreover, psychological assessments allow for the customisation of educational and biopsychosocial

interventions to fit the learner's specific needs, instead of relying on generic strategies. This diagnostic accuracy is vital for ensuring that neurodivergent learners are not only included in the education system, but also genuinely supported within it.

Individualised support and differentiated instruction

Assessment data translate into actionable recommendations that inform accommodations, scaffolds, goal-setting, and instructional strategies tailored to the learner's profile (Tomlinson, 2014). This process supports differentiated instruction by aligning pedagogical approaches with learners' thinking, feelings, and engagement. For twice exceptional learners (gifted and neurodiverse), psychological assessment ensures that both strengths and support needs are recognised, preventing mislabelling and exclusion.

Equity, access, and multidisciplinary collaboration

Psychological assessment promotes equity by clarifying the nature of a learner's challenges, thus reducing the risk of inappropriate placement or punitive responses to misunderstood behaviours (Cadime & Mendes, 2024). It provides a shared language for educators, therapists, families, and policy-makers, facilitating multidis-

ciplinary collaboration and coherent support planning. When communicated effectively, assessment findings empower learners with self-awareness, advocacy skills, and resilience, which are key attributes for long-term engagement and success.

Systemic Challenges in the Namibian Context

Despite its potential, implementing psychological assessment in Namibia faces systemic challenges. Regulatory guidelines from the Health Professions Council of Namibia limit the use of psychological diagnostic tools to educational and clinical psychologists, ensuring their ethical and competent application (Republic of Namibia, 2009). However, access to these professionals and services is limited, as discussed below, with some of the factors contributing to this being:

- a. Most psychologists and allied health professionals are based in urban centres, resulting in neurodivergent learners in rural Namibia not benefitting from these services. The consequent skewed benefits and long-term outcomes are obvious.
- b. The availability of services in state facilities versus in the private sector: there are very few professionals who work in government institutions (those who do are also mostly

in urban centres) and most of these professionals do not have the psychodiagnostics tools needed to assess neurodivergent presentations.

- c. Most professionals are concentrated in the private sector, where the clientele have medical aid cover. The result is that most Namibian learners do not access these services because they do not have medical aid cover, and the services are unaffordable.
- d. Affordability is also a concern for psychologists and allied health professionals; the cost of acquiring up-to-date, locally relevant assessment tools is exorbitant for practitioners.
- e. Benchmark tariffs set by medical aid administrators often do not reflect the full cost of psychodiagnostic assessments, which then discourages professionals from investing in comprehensive tools, leading to limitations in gaining a comprehensive diagnosis.
- f. Practitioners may rely on outdated or non-standardised instruments, which can produce incomplete or misleading profiles.

Even when valid assessments are administered, the results are not always translated into actionable interventions

for educators or allied health providers, which may lead to missed opportunities for targeted support. For example, a diagnosis of ADHD may be recorded without detailing its implications for academic functioning, such as its impact on mathematical reasoning, or written expression, or how ADHD may impact visual-motor functioning which directly impacts the learner's writing skills, meaning that the learner may need the assistance of an occupational therapist and remedial mathematics lessons, etc.

Referral gaps: A further challenge lies in the breakdown of referral networks. Many neurodivergent learners are not detected or appropriately referred due to limited awareness, time constraints, or bottlenecks in public services. Without timely referral and coordinated care, neurodivergent learners risk being excluded from interventions that could significantly alter their academic trajectories (Wechsler, 2014; Decker & Luedke, 2021; Sattler, 2024; Weiss et al., 2019; Flanagan & Alfonso, 2017).

Toward a strength-based, responsive system

To realise the full value of psychological assessment, Namibia's education system must invest in training educators to recognise neurodivergent presentations and make informed referrals, strengthen referral networks

between schools and qualified service providers, ensure ethical, regulated use of psychodiagnostic tools by registered professionals and promote strength-based narratives that validate neurodivergent learners and guide tailored interventions (Fisher et al., 2025). When these conditions are met, psychological assessment becomes more than a diagnostic tool; it becomes a gateway to equity and dignity, and promotes thriving for neurodivergent learners.

Accommodations to support the neurodivergent learners

Accommodations for neurodivergent learners are designed to reduce barriers, not lower expectations. By providing tailored accommodations and fostering an inclusive, supportive environment, educators can help neurodivergent learners maximise their potential and achieve success in their educational journey. They honour the learner's cognitive profile while preserving access to the full curriculum. The core principles of accommodation are:

- a. **Access over alteration:** Accommodations adjust how learning happens, not what is taught.
- b. **Individualised support:** This is based on assessments, observations, and learner input.

- c. Legal frameworks: The Education Act of 2000, the SPIE, and all legal frameworks are fully applied.

(Nthontho & Naidoo, 2025; Alliance against Seclusion and Restraint: Opening Doors to Safer and More Inclusive Schools, 2025; Azuka et al., 2024).

Accommodations are not about providing neurodivergent learners with an “unfair advantage”: they aim to make education more accessible, like adding a ramp for a wheelchair user or subtitles for a foreign language film. However, Tomlinson (2014, p. 6) made reference to contexts where accommodations for neurodivergent learners are perceived as unfair: “How can a classroom be fair if all students don’t get the same [homework, version of a test, time to complete work, etc.]?” (p. 6). However, in the context of neurodivergent learners, fairness isn’t everyone getting the same thing: fairness is everyone getting what they need to succeed (ibid.). Understanding accommodations for neurodivergent learners can significantly impact their educational experience. Those small adjustments make a substantial difference. With the right tools and strategies, everyone can succeed. Accommodations used to level the learning field for the neurodivergent learner are outlined below.

Common accommodations for the neurodiverse learner:

- Environmental adjustments
- Flexible seating (e.g., wobble stools, standing desks)
- Noise-cancelling headphones or quiet zones
- Reduced visual/auditory clutter
- Access to sensory tools (e.g., fidget items, weighted lap pads)
- Instructional supports

Accommodations by neurotype:

- **ADHD:** Movement breaks, visual timers, distraction-free zones
- **Autism:** Predictable routines, sensory accommodations, social skills coaching
- **Dyslexia:** Extra-time, audiobooks, text-to-speech technologies, reading guides, scribes
- **Anxiety:** Reduced performance pressure, previewing tasks, calming strategies
- **Dyspraxia:** Extra time, fine motor supports, alternative formats for output

(Barrett et al., 2015; Koenig & Rudney, 2010)

Supporting neurodivergent learners such as those with ADHD, autism, dyslexia, and other neurodevelopmental

tal differences requires thoughtful and individualised approaches to accommodate their unique needs. It is common cause that schools (especially less-resourced schools) may lack the funds to acquire the assistive devices that will make the learning path of the neurodivergent learner as smooth and as enriching as possible (Smith-Young et al., 2022). The inclusivity that is proposed in the SPIE remains a pipe-dream for many Namibian children, and they remain unable to derive the maximum reward from the educational environment. The dismal results, poor academic mastery and drop-out rates, as well as the well-documented deterioration in discipline and uptick in conduct problems at schools, could be partially traced to the neurodivergent learner who is frustrated and not mastering developmentally expected tasks (Loe & Feldman, 2007; Gubbels et al., 2019; GEMRT, 2020). The school environment is core to a child's development of a positive sense of self, competence, and identity formation, but the loop of poor academic attainment, deterioration in discipline, and increasing childhood mental health illnesses will continue if learners who are struggling at school find themselves in classrooms, schools and an educational environment that is not responsive to their needs.

On the other hand, a well-resourced school may provide their neurodivergent

learners with better opportunities to thrive, but at significant cost to the parent. It is not easy even for the better economically endowed parents, as oftentimes schools expect the parents of the neurodivergent learner to pay for the assistive devices (the reader, the scribe, the enlargement of fonts, the video recorder, the person needed to sit with the learner who requires extended time, etc.). These parents may have the additional burden of placing the child at a well-resourced school in the first place (at a hefty price) and on top of that bear the additional cost for any assistive tools the learner may require (Republic of Namibia, 2025). The cost notwithstanding, these demands (made even by well-resourced schools) are in conflict with the provisions of the SPIE. It appears that most schools (both private and public) find the actual task of implementing the provisions of the SPIE cumbersome, often resulting in a lackadaisical approach to its provisions.

It is common knowledge that public schools are resource-constrained, have bloated class sizes, inadequate teacher-to-learner ratios, limited financial resources, packed syllabi, and school calendar limitations, and that they experience challenges regarding the provision of the enriching and responsive environment required by the neurodivergent learner. It is expected that there will be no room for modifications and adjustments to make provision for

the needs of the neurodivergent learners to be comprehensively met, even though the SPIE advocates such measures. The divide between the neurodivergent learner in a public school versus a similar learner in a private school will have the unintended consequence of facilitating elitism in education, thereby perpetuating injustice and inequity.

To expand on and elucidate the latter point: well-resourced schools are usually able to acquire assistive devices, albeit at great cost to the parent, and are able to modify the learning environment because conditions at such schools (smaller classes, a better teacher-to-learner ratio, more financial muscle) are likely to provide for such modifications (Hove & Phasha, 2024; Josua, 2022).

*Falling through the cracks:
the marginalisation of
neurodivergent learners*

The adverse and often long-term outcomes for the neurodivergent learner are well documented throughout the literature. The psychologist Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory posits that from conception until death the individual is tasked with mastery of certain developmental tasks, the successful or unsuccessful mastery of which may have outcomes that may be positive or negative (Erikson, 1963). Successful mastery of these developmental tasks

may lead to virtues such as trust, confidence, industriousness and the development of a positive self-concept, acquisition of feelings of love, hope, etc. The opposite is also true: failure to successfully master the developmental tasks may lead to mistrust, perceived inferiority, hopelessness, and a lack of industriousness, amongst others (ibid.).

The combination of the intrapersonal battle that is borne of poor mastery of expected and appropriate developmental outcomes, on the one hand, and an educational environment that is unresponsive and fails to understand its interface with neurodivergent cognitive functioning, on the other, can lead to irreversible negative outcomes. Over time, unsupported needs are linked to instability in schooling (e.g., repeated classroom transfers) and increased risk of disengagement and dropping out. Such exclusionary trajectories also correlate with externalising behaviours that may escalate, such as impulsivity, school dropout, stealing, and substance use, further compounding negative educational and life outcomes (Morgan et al., 2019). When neurodivergent learners “fall through the cracks”, they can be misread as uncooperative or “problematic”, and this stigmatisation is often reinforced by negative name-calling, thus undermining a sense of belonging and willingness to seek help.

Due to their unique presentation and challenges, the odds are already stacked against the neurodivergent learner; the mastery of developmental tasks is inherently challenging, yet they must also contend with a learning environment that is, largely, not responsive to their needs (Ndou-Chikwena & Sefotho, 2025). This may be attributed to wilful or negligent non-compliance with the provisions of the SPIE, or these provisions not being practicable because the system has not provided the required resources for their implementation (Mckinney 2018).

On an intrapersonal and personal level, and an ecological level, the unique presentation of the neurodivergent learner already poses serious challenges for their holistic functioning. The failure of stakeholders to comply with and implement the provisions of the SPIE on inclusive education increases the risk of learners falling through the cracks.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The evidence and narratives presented in this article converge on a central claim: Namibia's SPIE articulates an ambitious, learner-centred vision, yet a persistent policy–practice gap leaves neurodivergent learners dependent on individual advocacy rather than systemic responsiveness. Drawing

together the autoethnographic account of parenting, the clinician's reflections on practice, and the policy analysis, the study shows that meaningful inclusion requires more than placement; it requires ZPD-attuned pedagogy, dignified accommodations that remove barriers without lowering expectations, and psychoeducational assessment that is translated into practical classroom supports. When these elements align, the developmental insights of Vygotsky (1978) and Erikson (1963) become visible in everyday practice: learners' strengths are leveraged, socioemotional risks are mitigated, and participation and progression become realistic for the neurodivergent learner. The system in its current form cannot deal with difference, and therefore inadvertently excludes learners who learn differently. This then requires the learner to fit or mould himself/herself to how the system functions, and not for the system to meet the learner where they are emotionally, cognitively, physically and behaviourally.

Key lessons are manifold. First, the principal obstacles are systemic, not individual:

- a. Consistent and concerted identification and referral efforts must be undertaken to equip educators with knowledge and basic tools to identify the neurodivergent learner and

know what the appropriate referral mechanisms and networks are.

- b. Cost and access-related barriers to up-to-date assessments, and inequities between well-resourced and under-resourced schools collectively produce avoidable exclusion. The custodian ministry of the SPIE must make provision for the acquisition of psychodiagnostic assessment tools, employ appropriately trained personnel to administer the tools, and ensure that the Namibian learner who needs to be assessed has access to such services.
- c. Psychological assessment adds value only when its findings are converted into actionable support accommodations, scaffolds, flexible assessment, and coordinated care plans that are co-designed by teachers, families, and allied professionals, and monitored to assess their impact. Understanding the nature of neurodivergence, implementing and complying with the provisions of the SPIE, and the education sector's vigorous efforts aimed at creating a responsive and enriching learning environment will make the implementation of psychodiagnostic recommendations easier, and the learning environment more equitable for the neurodivergent learner.
- d. Equity demands that schools institutionalise universal design for learning and differentiated instruction as default practices, so that learners are not merely present, but fully engaged, with clear pathways to demonstrate competence in ways that honour their cognitive profiles. The custodian ministry must, additionally, ensure that schools the length and breadth of Namibia understand, implement and comply with the provisions of the SPIE.
- e. A deliberate and well-resourced shift is urgently required, one that embeds inclusive design as standard practice, strengthens pre- and in-service teacher preparation in neurodiversity and inclusive pedagogy, and equips schools with the multidisciplinary support essential for meaningful participation.
- f. Policymakers, education leaders, and training institutions must prioritise structural reforms that honour the rights, dignity, and potential of every child. Without this collective commitment, the promise of inclusive education

will remain aspirational rather than transformative.

In summary, Namibia must invest in resourcing schools with multidisciplinary support, and institutionalise accountability mechanisms that ensure that policy implementation is felt at classroom level. Only through such intentional, collective action can the sector realise its commitment to an education system where every child is valued, supported, and able to reach their full potential.

Accordingly, we recommend a focused implementation agenda:

1. Mandate pre- and in-service training in neurodiversity, assessment literacy, and inclusive pedagogy for all teachers and school leaders, and ensure that compliance with the SPIE is integral (not optional) for all Namibian educators to facilitate the internalisation of its provisions: Ongoing professional development activities that are focused on inclusive pedagogy and emerging trends in creating responsive and enriching learning environments for the neurodivergent learner must be hosted on a regular basis for all educators, not only for those teachers tasked with the

special education component of teaching and learning.

2. Operationalise universal design and flexible assessment policies at school level, with routine translation of assessment results into classroom-ready plans and periodic review of their efficacy.
3. Strengthen accountability through policy compliance audits and public reporting on inclusion indicators (identification, accommodations granted, progression, and dropout) and capture these data in the Education Information Monitoring System.
4. Embed family-centred partnership and learner voice in all decisions that affect support.

The experiences documented in this case study suggest that strengthening inclusive education in Namibia requires moving beyond policy commitments toward systemic reforms that respond more directly to the lived realities of neurodivergent learners and their families. In particular, the revision of the SPIE presents an opportunity to integrate mechanisms for early neurodevelopmental screening within early childhood education, allowing potential learning differences to be identified and supported before academic difficulties become entrenched. Complementing early identification, the establishment of regional multi-

disciplinary neurodiversity support centres could provide schools with access to specialised expertise, including educational psychologists, speech and language therapists, and occupational therapists, thereby reducing the current reliance on privately accessed services and mitigating inequities in support provision.

Furthermore, inclusive education would be strengthened by embedding neurodiversity-responsive curriculum and assessment design within national education frameworks, ensuring that cognitive diversity is accommodated structurally rather than addressed through ad hoc classroom adjustments. Equally important is the development of a national awareness strategy on neurodiversity, aimed at addressing stigmatisation and enhancing understanding among educators, parents, and school communities. Finally, policy revision should extend its scope beyond schooling by introducing structured transition pathways for neurodivergent learners from secondary education into tertiary education, vocational training, and employment. Such measures would reposition inclusive education not only as a matter of classroom access but as a broader commitment to educational equity and long-term social participation for neurodivergent individuals in Namibia. Implemented together, these measures would

move the system from ad-hoc accommodation to embedded inclusive design, narrowing the policy-practice gap and enabling neurodivergent learners across Namibia to participate, achieve, and thrive.

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Case Study: Bridging the Gender Gap in Education in Zambezi Region, Namibia

Phiona Nandu

Abstract:

Education remains one of the most powerful tools for promoting gender equality and social justice. In many parts of Namibia, especially Zambezi Region, girls encounter structural and cultural obstacles that impede their educational progress. This case study examines the intersection of education and gender justice through research and personal experience, highlighting the challenges, ongoing interventions, and aspirations of a generation striving to overcome inequality.

Background

Located in the north-eastern corner of Namibia, Zambezi Region is a lush, fertile area bordered by Angola, Zambia, Botswana, and Zimbabwe. While rich in natural resources and cultural heritage, the region faces high rates of poverty, teenage pregnancy, and gender-based violence, factors that significantly impede access to education, particularly for girls.

According to the Namibia Statistics Agency (NSA), Zambezi Region has



Gender justice in education remains a challenge. Source: Emmanuel Abiodun, Pexels

one of the highest school dropout rates in the country, with girls more likely to drop out between Grades 8 to 10 than boys (NSA, 2021). Girls drop out of school at a higher rate than boys due to specific gender-related factors. Teenage pregnancy and early marriage are the primary causes of school dropout among girls, with 147 cases of teenage pregnancy reported in the first term of 2024 alone (Koooper, 2024). Additionally, 24% of girls in the region are married before the age of 18 (compared with a national average of 7% for girls, and 1% for boys) (Girls Not Brides, 2024). Although 430 boys and 162 girls dropped out of school in 2022, data show that the female dropout rate is driven by pregnancy and marriage, whereas the male dropout rate is largely due to behavioural issues (Heinrich, 2022).

Growing up as a girl in Zambezi (a personal reflection)

Growing up in an informal settlement called Choto, a compound in the town of Katima Mulilo, I attended a primary school with limited infrastructure, few female teachers and little privacy. I remember vividly how girls were often the last to speak in class, if they spoke at all, and how male learners dominated both academic and recreational spaces.

One of my closest friends, Kahundu, was known for her sharp mind and quiet

confidence. She dreamed of becoming a teacher. But at 15, she became pregnant and dropped out of school. Although the government has a readmission policy for teenage mothers (Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture [MEAC], 2018), the stigma and lack of support made it nearly impossible for her to return. She now helps her aunt at the local market, and while still smart and driven, she is held back by circumstances beyond her control.

These experiences were not unique. In nearly every grade I passed through, particularly in high school, at least one or two girls disappeared from the classroom each term, some due to pregnancy, others to marriage, and some simply because their parents couldn't afford uniforms or school supplies.

Key Challenges in Achieving Gender Justice in Education

Cultural norms and gender roles

In many Zambezi communities, deeply ingrained patriarchal traditions view girls as future wives and mothers, rather than learners or professionals. Educating a girl is often considered “wasteful” if she marries early (Legal Assistance Centre, 2017). These beliefs are reinforced by bride price (lobola) practices, which can encourage families

to marry off daughters for economic gain.

While Namibia's constitution guarantees gender equality, cultural practices often override legal protections, especially in rural areas.

Teenage pregnancy and lack of support: The MEAC's (2022) report indicated that 16% of girls aged 13 to 18 in Zambezi have experienced pregnancy while in school. Although the policy allows girls to return after giving birth, the psychological toll, lack of childcare, and community shaming result in many abandoning education altogether. From my experience, even when girls returned after giving birth, they were often isolated and given little academic or emotional support.

Poor infrastructure and sanitary facilities: Many schools in the region lack functional toilets, clean water, and private spaces for menstrual hygiene management (UNICEF Namibia, 2021). I remember girls skipping school during their periods because of embarrassment or fear of leaks. Without access to sanitary pads and safe spaces, education becomes a monthly battle for dignity.

Safety and gender-based violence: Gender-based violence is a persistent issue in Zambezi Region's education system. Reports of verbal harassment, inappropriate behaviour by teachers,

and physical abuse by peers remain prevalent (UNFPA Namibia, 2020). In many cases, victims have no safe channels to report abuse without risking retaliation. This hostile environment leads to high dropout rates and significantly affects academic performance. During my secondary school years, there were always rumours about male teachers dating learners. No investigations followed, and some of the girls eventually left school due to "shame", while the teachers remained employed.

Namibian Government Initiatives

The 2009 policy on the re-admission of pregnant learners encourages teenage mothers to return to school after childbirth (MEAC, 2018). While progressive, it lacks the resources (for example, childcare facilities and psychological counselling) to be effective on the ground. Free primary education ensures access to basic education, but doesn't take hidden costs, such as uniforms, books, or boarding fees, into account (MEAC, 2022). The Life Skills curriculum tackles topics like gender equality, HIV, and relationships, though the implementation varies depending on teacher training and resources.

NGO and civil society efforts

UNFPA and UNICEF have supported reproductive health and

gender education in rural schools (UNFPA Namibia, 2020; UNICEF Namibia, 2021).

Forum for African Women Educationalists in Namibia (FAWENA) provides bursaries, mentorship, and advocacy to keep girls in school (FAWENA, 2019).

Local **radio campaigns and youth clubs** have begun shifting community attitudes, with some success stories in villages like Kasheshe and Linyanti, where early marriage rates have declined slightly.

Local champions

One outstanding example is Miriam, a girl from Lisikili village, who lost both her parents to illness and was raised by her grandmother. With the support of a bursary, she managed to stay in school despite intense pressure to marry early (FAWENA, 2019). Today, she's a third-year student at the University of Namibia, Katima Mulilo campus, studying Education. She returns home each school break to run study sessions for local girls and talk to parents about the importance of education. Her story is a testament to what's possible when support, resilience, and opportunity come together.

In Oshana and Khomas regions, gender parity in education is significantly

better due to various factors that set them apart, such as access to better urban infrastructure, like transportation, electricity, and internet connectivity, which improves the learning environment. While urban regions still face gender issues, the lack of infrastructure and services compounds barriers in remote areas like Zambezi Region.

In regions with higher levels of parental education, more parents are literate, resulting in the value of girls' education being better understood, and more female teachers creating safer and more relatable spaces for girls (UNESCO, 2020).

Recommendations for a Gender-Just Education System in Zambezi Region

General

Improve menstrual health management: Provide free sanitary pads and safe disposal bins in schools; build private, clean, and functional toilets for girls (UNICEF Namibia, 2021).

Strengthen implementation of re-admission policy: Offer daycare services or partnerships for young mothers; create peer support and mentorship programmes for returning learners (MEAC, 2018).

Community sensitisation: Engage traditional leaders and parents through

culturally sensitive workshops (Legal Assistance Centre, 2017); use radio, drama and storytelling to challenge harmful gender norms.

Educational and emotional support: Support girls academically and emotionally and provide scholarships for girls in financial need (FAWENA, 2019).

Protection from gender-based violence
Mandatory reporting and school protocols:

All schools should be legally required to report suspected cases of sexual violence or relationships between minors and adults. This can be enforced through MEAC audits and penalties for non-compliance.

Community watchdog committees: Establish and train community-based monitoring groups made up of trusted local figures to track, report, and follow up on cases of sexual exploitation and underage relationships.

Fast-track courts for sexual offences: Introduce mobile or circuit courts in Zambezi that prioritise gender-based violence cases, minimising delays that often deter victims from seeking justice.

Training: Train teachers on gender sensitivity and child protection (UNFPA Namibia, 2020).

Reporting: Establish clear reporting channels with protection for victims.

Civic education campaigns: Use local languages to run targeted awareness campaigns on the Combating of Rape Act (8 of 2000), children's rights, and legal consequences for offenders.

Conclusion: A Call for Transformation

Zambezi Region holds the potential to lead Namibia in gender-responsive education if its unique challenges are met with targeted, inclusive solutions. For every girl like Miriam, there are dozens like Kahundu, whose potential is lost, not for lack of intelligence, but for lack of opportunity and justice.

Having grown up in this region, I've seen the pain and promise firsthand. This issue is not abstract, it is personal. But it is also hopeful, because every empowered girl becomes a voice, a teacher, a leader, and a change-maker. Let us invest in that future.

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Political Worker Education in Namibia: The Case of the Labour Diploma Course

Herbert Jauch

Background

The current world order is underpinned by vested business interests and the dominance of transnational corporations whose networks span the globe. They not only control the economic sphere but are also influential in the political arena, and thus maintain a highly exploitative social and economic order not only in Namibia, but virtually worldwide.

Against this background, this case study examines what role political worker education can play in preparing workers and their trade unions in their struggle to achieve a different and more just social and economic order. The focus is on experiences with the labour diploma for trade unionists which was introduced in 2002.¹



Labour diploma students during a group discussion. Source: Herbert Jauch

1 This case study is largely based on the account presented in Jauch (2026).

During the 1980s, when many of Namibia's current trade unions started to emerge, education was a kind of add-on to the broader task of mass mobilisation amongst workers. Struggles for better working conditions were linked to the broader political goal of achieving national independence. At the time, union education was driven by a small group of people who saw the need to develop workers' consciousness beyond the national liberation discourse towards working class struggles. These early education activities were an attempt to link education, class consciousness, organising, and mass mobilisation (Pakleppa, 1988).

Union meetings in the 1980s were usually held in public halls, often without chairs, with everybody sitting on the floor in a circle. This created a sense of comradeship and equality. Likewise, education activities took place in offices or public halls with the flipchart being the only tool, sometimes accompanied by a few pamphlets. The use of pictures, cartoons and different languages characterised this kind of basic worker education in the 1980s. It was a tentative beginning with the aim of ultimately building worker power and worker control (Pakleppa, 1988).

After independence, worker education became more institutionalised, with some unions establishing their own education departments. Various

support organisations such as the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung entered the field and sponsored union workshops. This era was characterised by a move away from the mass mobilisation of workers towards leadership negotiations in boardrooms. Key union leaders joined government structures, and the role of trade unions was increasingly confined to collective bargaining. Their role was narrowed to that of a "social partner" within a tripartite setting. Although some education programmes still focused on policy issues like the land question and a living wage, union education increasingly focused on "practical issues" like the Labour Act (6 of 1992) and collective bargaining. The aim was to equip workers and their unions with the knowledge needed to play their tripartite role more effectively. Union workshops were increasingly facilitated by "experts", sometimes flown in from South Africa. Some were drawn from Namibian organisations that had nothing to do with the labour movement.

This trend in workers' education only began to change with the establishment of the union-based Labour Resource and Research Institute (LaRRI) in 1998. Although its key focus was research into policy issues, LaRRI soon realised that the research work had to be complemented by an education programme to build the internal capacity of trade unions to engage

with organisational and broader policy challenges. Following discussions with the Workers' College in South Africa and with various Namibian unions, LaRRI decided in 2002 to follow in the footsteps of the College and to introduce a similar modular worker education programme, which became known as the labour diploma (Jauch, 2013).

Purpose

The labour diploma sought to broaden the scope and improve the quality of worker education programmes in terms of conscientisation capacity. This course aimed to combine knowledge acquisition and analytical skills, as well as political education and critical thinking amongst workers, union leaders, and officials. The course served to prepare workers and trade unionists for leadership positions at various levels, ranging from shop stewards to branch and national union structures. Most importantly, the course provided a platform for critical debate. Despite the adoption of a liberal form of democracy, a restrictive political climate continued to prevail in many organisations, including trade unions. Critical debate was frequently regarded as “subversive” in many of Namibia’s political organisations, and the open contestation of ideas was not encouraged (Jauch, 2013).

The intention of the labour diploma was therefore to create a space for open

engagement. Instead of being bound by trade union positions and political directives, the worker-students were encouraged to debate freely and to substantiate their arguments, based on readings, research and their own experiences. They obtained their course marks not on the basis of the views they held, but on the basis of the quality of their arguments. This enabled them to explore issues and to express views on issues that were not openly discussed in their unions or in society in general.

Another important aspect was to break workers’ fear of tertiary education. Older workers, in particular, suffered the effects of colonial apartheid education and were never afforded the opportunity to pursue further studies. The labour diploma thus provided the first opportunity for many of them to participate in a programme of higher learning. LaRRI tried to ensure equal gender representation by reserving up to 50% of all places available for women (Jauch, 2013). The course’s overall aim was to strengthen the participants’ ability to contribute to the building of a stronger, more conscious labour movement.

Target Group and Curriculum

After the consultations between the Workers College, LaRRI and some Namibian trade unions, internal discussions were intensified to identify the

target groups and the course contents. Agreement was reached that the course should be open to all trade union members and that preference should be given to active members who served in union structures, such as shop stewards (elected workers' representatives at the workplace) and workers serving in branch, regional or national leadership structures. In addition, union officials such as organisers and administrators were also welcome to apply. It was agreed that the course participation should be gender-balanced, and that participants should be drawn from a wide spread of trade unions.

In terms of the course curriculum, as the implementing organisation, LaRRI was able to draw on some of the experiences of the Workers College in South Africa. Various options were presented at meetings with Namibian trade union representatives, who identified some of the key issues which were critical for the labour movement and should therefore be covered in the course. These included the history of the labour movement in Namibia and globally; the relationship between unions and politics (locally, continentally and globally); the question of worker control; gender equality; health and safety at work; labour law; collective bargaining; and economic policy options.

Based on these key issues, LaRRI then developed six modules which

formed the curriculum of the labour diploma:

1. Trade Union History and Theory;
2. Namibia's Political Economy;
3. Occupational Health and Safety, and HIV/AIDS;
4. Gender and Affirmative Action;
5. Labour Law and Collective Bargaining; and
6. Globalisation.

Local resource persons and lecturers were identified for each module, drawn from the ranks of LaRRI, the trade unions, and the University of Namibia. They were chosen based on their specific subject knowledge and were tasked with developing a course reader and topics for course assignments, as well as examination questions. In addition, LaRRI offered the course participants supplementary courses to enhance very practical skills, such as English writing skills and computer skills (Jauch, 2013). Participants were also asked to formally evaluate each module to enable continuous adjustments and improvements.

The Workers' College provided support with course materials and advice on the structure of the course, as well as accreditation. The University of KwaZulu-Natal conducted the external moderation of the examinations. In 2007, the labour diploma was officially

accredited by the Namibia Qualification Authority as the Certificate in Labour Studies.

Financial support for the labour diploma was provided by the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung in Germany, the Finish Trade Union Solidarity Centre, and the Netherlands Trade Union Federation. This support enabled LaRRI to offer the course for a nominal fee.

Pedagogic and Methodological Approach

A central and cross-cutting issue was social and economic justice as a global challenge in the face of a crisis-ridden global capitalist system that continuously widens inequality and results in mass unemployment and poverty. Understanding this phenomenon and what possible remedies and alternatives existed was a critical part of the course. Thus, case studies on Venezuela's "Socialism of the 21st Century" and the proposals contained in the regional trade union project "Alternatives to Neoliberalism in Southern Africa" formed part of the course (Jauch, 2013).

Each module was presented for one week of direct interaction between the resource persons and about 25–35 participants. In the mornings, formal lectures and interactive discussions took place, while the afternoons were

used for reading the course materials to deepen the participants understanding. The resource persons had identified relevant articles and book chapters or had developed such reading materials themselves as part of the course readers.

Emphasis was placed on participatory methods to enable participants to play an active role and share their own experiences. After the module week of direct interaction, each participant had to choose one of the assignment topics on offer, write the assignment, and then hand it in at the beginning of the next module. Participants also had to write an examination on each module which counted for half the course marks.

Results

In 2007, LaRRI convened a formal evaluation of the labour diploma course with graduates who had completed it in the preceding five years. They identified several benefits from the course, such as an improved understanding of Namibia political economy, more effective bargaining practices, the ability to design union campaigns against labour hire practices, greater appreciation of gender equality issues, improved trade union response to the HIV/AIDS pandemic, and improved understanding of labour laws and the importance of health and safety at work. The graduates also pointed out that the course provided them with new skills and insights, and the confidence to

debate policy issues and effect changes in workplaces (LaRRI, 2007).

The graduates mentioned some of the challenges they experienced. These included disappointment that some of the unions did not fully utilise and recognise their skills. In some cases, they were even seen as a threat by union leaders (LaRRI, 2007). Overall, the course was valued by workers not only because of its contents and relevance for the labour movement, but also because the accreditation offered possibilities for further studies and promotions at work as well as possible key leadership positions in the unions (Moodley & Jauch, 2020).

The labour diploma attempted to counter the shift within trade unions towards more hierarchical forms of organisation and the narrow focus of union leaders on tripartite engagement. The course's impact can therefore not simply be measured by the number of graduates or by the evaluation of the course undertaken by the participants themselves. These evaluations may attest to the popularity of the course, but they do capture the course's wider impact, namely how has it contributed to a strengthening of the labour movement and its capacity to articulate and promote the interests of the working classes and the poor. In what ways has the course enabled the participants to make a difference

in terms of social progress and transformation?

There are no definitive answers. While the course has been described as an “eye-opener” by many of the worker-students, it has not been able to prevent the further decline of Namibia's labour movement, which is deeply divided and struggles to address socioeconomic injustices. Furthermore, worker-students who tried to implement ideas about workers' control and accountability in their respective unions often found themselves confronted by national union leaders who regarded such ideas as a threat to their control over unions. As a result, some of the worker-students were sidelined within their own unions (Moodley & Jauch, 2020).

The specific aim of creating a type of worker education programme that focuses on critical thinking, questioning existing hierarchies and vested interests, and envisaging a fundamentally different future society invariably clashes with the general political and economic trends in Namibia. If trade unions want to be agents for social change and transformation, then union education must be political and radical in order to contribute towards improving workers' lives, and to transforming society in general, including its consciousness and values. The envisaged role that

unions are willing and able to play has a direct impact on the kind of workers' education that will be offered and the impact that it can have. Social change and substantive transformation will only be achieved if political worker education programmes are linked with new practices of organising and mobilisation based on the principles of workers' control and participatory union democracy. After all, political worker education is merely one site of the broader political and economic struggle (Moodley & Jauch, 2020).

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Dissecting the Subsidised Funding Model in Namibia 2026: Free Registration and the Question of Sustainable Access to Higher Education

Benhard Kavau

Introduction

The introduction of a subsidised funding model in Namibia's higher education, particularly the abolition of registration fees for qualifying students, marks a significant policy intervention aimed at enhancing access to tertiary education. While the policy resonates with Namibia's constitutional and political commitment to education as a public good, its implementation raises complex financial, institutional, and regulatory questions. This article critically examines the concept of subsidised funding, focussing particularly on free registration, interrogates emerging implementation predicaments, and situates Namibia's approach within comparative international experiences as a partner in a global village.

Access to education as a national ideal

Access to education has long been central to Namibia's post-independence developmental vision. Article 20 of

the Namibian Constitution enshrines education as a fundamental right, and successive political leaders have reinforced this principle. Founding President Sam Nujoma asserted that "education is the cornerstone of national development and the most powerful weapon to liberate our people from poverty and ignorance" (Nujoma, 2001). Similarly, former President Hifikepunye Pohamba emphasised that higher education should not become "the privilege of the few, but a right accessible to all capable Namibians" (Pohamba, 2014). Following independence, student bodies played a crucial role in policy dialogue and reforms pertaining to education in Namibia. The slogan in 1989 of the Namibian National Students Organisation (NANSO), for example, was "Education a right, not a privilege". In 2019 the Students Union of Namibia (SUN) was officially launched, with one of its core commitments being to advocate for access to quality education in Namibia.

Against this ideological backdrop, the recent policy decision that public and private universities and colleges should no longer charge registration fees to qualifying students is a bold attempt to dismantle financial barriers at the point of entry into higher education.

The Subsidised Funding Model and Free Registration

In practice, Namibian higher education institutions have ceased charging registration fees to students who meet admission requirements for their primary qualifications at TVET (technical and vocational education and training) institutions, and tertiary education institutions that offer level 6 to 8 qualifications. The state has now committed to covering these costs through direct subsidies. This approach reflects a broader subsidised funding model, where the government assumes part of the financial burden that includes registration and tuition fees traditionally borne by students and households.

However, institutions have simultaneously introduced indemnity forms requiring students and their parents or guardians to acknowledge liability should the government fail to honour future registration payments. This development exposes uncertainty surrounding the sustainability and pre-

dictability of state funding, potentially undermining the policy's stated objective of easing financial anxiety among students.

Funding mechanisms: Standardisation or market-based reimbursement?

A central unresolved question concerns how the government will determine the value of registration fees payable to institutions. If reimbursement is based on the actual registration fees charged by each institution, disparities will inevitably arise. Institutions charging higher fees would receive greater subsidies, while those charging lower fees would receive commensurately lower transfers. Such a model may inadvertently incentivise institutions to increase registration fees, resulting in an opportunity cost that contradicts the access-driven rationale of subsidisation.

Alternatively, the government may opt for a standardised registration fee applicable across all institutions. While administratively simpler, this approach would introduce new dilemmas. Institutions whose historic fees exceed the standardised amount may require students to “top up” to cover the difference. Such cost-sharing would effectively reintroduce financial barriers and defeat the philosophical core of subsidised access.

Public institutions and internal variations

Even within the public sector, complexity persists. Namibia's two largest public universities charge different registration fees, reflecting divergent operational costs, strategic priorities, and academic offerings. Should the government benchmark its standardised subsidy against one institution, the other may experience structural underfunding. This highlights the tension between equity, efficiency, and institutional autonomy within subsidised funding frameworks.

Private institutions: Inclusion or marginalisation

The position of private higher education institutions remains equally ambiguous. Now that they are included in the subsidy scheme, critical questions emerge:

- Are private institutions permitted to charge additional registration fees over and above the government subsidy?
- Should their funding be needs-based, performance-based, or aligned with public institutional benchmarks?

International experience suggests that excluding private institutions can limit system-wide access, while including them without regulation

risks public funds subsidising profit-driven models (Johnstone, 2018).

Comparative approaches from other countries

Namibia's experiment is not unprecedented. Germany abolished tuition fees in public universities, financing higher education through general taxation, while maintaining strict institutional cost controls (Marginson, 2016). In South Africa, the National Student Financial Aid Scheme covers registration and tuition for qualifying students, but ongoing challenges around delayed payments and institutional debt mirror Namibia's emerging concerns (Badat, 2020). Similarly, Brazil's subsidised public university model emphasises free access but limits enrolment capacity, raising a new set of equity questions.

These cases demonstrate that subsidised funding improves access, but demands robust governance, transparency, and long-term fiscal commitment. These cases demonstrate that while subsidised funding plays a critical role in expanding access to education, particularly for students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, it is not a sufficient solution. The effectiveness of such funding is heavily dependent on the presence of robust governance systems that ensure that funds are allocated efficiently,

equitably, and for their intended purposes. Without strong oversight mechanisms, subsidised schemes are vulnerable to mismanagement, delays, and corruption, which ultimately undermine their impact on student welfare.

In addition, subsidised funding requires sustained long-term fiscal commitment from the state or relevant authorities. This fiscal commitment entails the consistent allocation of adequate budgetary resources to student support programmes over multiple financial years, rather than reliance on ad hoc or politically contingent funding decisions. It includes ensuring that funding institutions are sufficiently capitalised to meet both tuition and non-tuition obligations, adjusting allocations in line with inflation and rising education costs, and embedding student funding within national development and expenditure frameworks. Furthermore, it involves forward planning, such as multi-year budgeting and contingency provisions, to guarantee continuity of support even in times of economic constraint.

Conversely, inconsistent funding cycles result in irregular, delayed, or unpredictable disbursement of funds to beneficiaries. This may manifest in late payments of allowances, partial disbursements, or sudden interruptions

in funding due to administrative inefficiencies, budget shortfalls, or policy shifts. Such inconsistencies create uncertainty for students, as they are unable to reliably plan for essential academic and living expenses throughout the academic year.

These disruptions often exacerbate financial insecurity among students, particularly those from low-income backgrounds who are heavily dependent on such support. Financial insecurity in this context entails the inability to pay for basic needs such as accommodation, food, transportation, learning materials, and digital resources. As a result, students may face heightened stress, resulting in poor academic performance and increased absenteeism, and may risk dropping out altogether. In severe cases, students may resort to precarious coping mechanisms, including taking on unsustainable debt or engaging in informal work that detracts from their studies. Therefore, stability, predictability, and adequacy of funding are crucial to ensuring that subsidised programmes are genuinely supporting student success, rather than inadvertently compounding existing vulnerabilities.

Conclusion and Policy Reflections

This article argues that Namibia's subsidised funding model, particularly

free registration, represents a progressive step toward educational justice. However, without a clearly articulated funding formula, the policy risks creating perverse incentives, institutional instability, and hidden costs for students.

A fixed, reasonable per-student registration subsidy, adjusted periodically and linked to enrolment numbers, may offer a balanced solution. Such a model would allow the state to promote access while compelling institutions to reflect critically on whether their fee structures serve educational access or market-oriented objectives. Nevertheless, the realities of a free-market environment cannot be entirely ignored.

Ultimately, the success of Namibia's subsidised funding model will depend not only on political will, but also on sustained public debate, empirical evaluation, and scholarly engagement. The policy must remain open to refinement if it is to fulfil the nation's long-standing promise that access to higher education "is a right, not a privilege".

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Contributing towards Social Justice in Namibia? The Activist School of the Economic and Social Justice Trust

Herbert Jauch & Nafimane Hamukoshi

Introduction

Activism around social justice issues has a long history in Namibia. In the runup to Namibia's independence in 1990, there were a host of organisations taking up social and economic justice issues around racism, housing, exploitation, gender discrimination, and inequality. Amongst the most significant formations were NANSO

(the Namibia National Students Organisation), the CCN (Council of Churches in Namibia), the emerging trade unions under the umbrella of the NUNW (National Union of Namibian Workers), the community organisation Bricks, and Namibia's Women's Voice. They campaigned around specific issues and linked themselves to the broader



Participants in action during a residential activist school. Source: Herbert Jauch

struggles for political and economic liberation.

After independence, several organisations continued to campaign and sought to influence policies of the democratically elected government. Besides the membership-based organisations mentioned above, several new NGOs emerged and worked broadly on developmental issues, such as service delivery, exclusion, and many other social and environmental matters. Many of these NGOs joined NANGOF (the Namibian NGO Forum), which operated as their umbrella body and gave voice to them on broader national and developmental issues.

However, the wide variety of NGOs and their differing orientations and focus areas, as well as their dependency on external donor funds, often presented formidable challenges in terms of advocating for a coherent socioeconomic and political agenda. This challenge was made worse by a developing general apathy based on the expectation that the government would solve Namibia's developmental challenges, and that there was no longer a need for active participation by citizens. Furthermore, at times the Namibian government responded with hostility when criticised, which undermined efforts to further develop an active citizenry.

This case study presents the experiences of the Economic and

Social Justice Trust (ESJT), which in 2018 established the EJST Activist School, mainly for younger people, to encourage and promote activism related to issues of social and economic justice.

Background

Around 2015, Namibia was officially classified as an upper middle-income country, which led to a host of donor organisations turning their backs on the country. As a result, projects undertaken by a variety of NGOs and even by membership-based organisations like trade unions and churches ran out of funds, and were either severely scaled down or closed altogether. Accompanied by general political apathy, this meant that the critical debates of the early years of independence almost disappeared and were replaced by a widespread sense of helplessness regarding the shaping of a new, socially just society.

The ESJT had been formed in 2012 by a group of activists to support and promote struggles for social and economic justice. It operated then without staff, had hardly any infrastructure or funding, and relied on the time and energy invested by its trustees and volunteers—a state of affairs that persists. The ESJT identified the urgent need to build a new layer of younger activists who can create new forms of organisations or join

existing ones to shape the making of a new society based on the principles of economic and social justice.

In March 2018, during the launch of a book on democratic developmental states in southern Africa, various young people in the audience indicated their interest in such discussions and asked the ESJT trustees to consider an initiative that would provide ongoing engagement. The Trust then decided to set up an activist school, in the main for young people who have a general interest in political, economic and social issues, and who want to become agents of change in the years to come. They were drawn from the ranks of students, trade unions, NGOs and community activists based on their shared interest in making a difference.

The early days of the ESJT Activist School

In 2018–19, the activist school commenced activities, organising monthly events in Windhoek which took place on Saturdays and catered for 25–30 aspiring activists. Guided by a group of resource persons and facilitators, the participants explored a variety of socioeconomic and political issues and debated possible action to effect change. The topics covered included inequality, unemployment and poverty; decent housing as a human right; the struggle for a living

wage; climate justice and the ecological crisis; the political economy; social protection; and gender justice.

The sessions consisted of lectures and discussions, film screenings, engagement with community-based organisations, amongst others. Importantly, the shape and contents of the programme were decided upon to a significant extent by the participants themselves, so that the school became an example of participatory democracy. It explored new forms of teaching and learning and did not rely exclusively on the traditional forms of lectures and reading. The school was a work in progress, and aimed at creating a critical consciousness amongst participants, and a desire to actively pursue the achievement of social and economic justice.

The ESJT merely played a facilitatory role by assisting with logistical arrangements, suggesting possible topics, identifying resource persons, and developing a course reader. The Namibia office of the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) provided support for these events, including venue hire, catering and transportation.

The shift towards a residential course

One challenge experienced with the monthly events was that not all

participants attended the sessions regularly. Another was that potential participants from the regions could not attend due to the costs of travelling. In 2023, the ESJT therefore decided to change the format into a five-day residential course. This was successfully piloted in Okahandja and Windhoek, and drew participants from all over Namibia.

During 2023 and 2024, the residential course focused mostly on Namibia's political economy. Its specific objectives were to increase participants' understanding of inequality and poverty, both locally and globally; to understand how Namibia's economy

functions, and why unemployment is so high, especially amongst the youth; to analyse Namibia's system of governance, democratic rights and the economy; and to explore what can be done by activists.

The course covered topics such as the historical background of colonialism, capitalism, socialism and Pan-Africanism, as well as inequality and poverty in Namibia today. It critically explored democratic rights and institutions and examined examples of concrete forms of activism, such as the protests against the proposed construction of new parliament buildings, and the #Shutitalldown



Creative work during an activist school. Source: Herbert Jauch

movement. Creative sessions focussing on teambuilding and employing arts for activism were a central part of the programme, as were evening sessions consisting of film screenings, storytelling around the fire, and “talent shows”.

In 2025, following the launch of the 4th edition of the Namibian Journal of Social Justice, which dealt with extractivism and climate change, the ESJT Activist School was amended to focus on these topics.

Results

The ESJT Activist School has created an important space for critical engagement on Namibia’s socioeconomic and political challenges at a time when public debate has declined. It has brought together young people from different backgrounds and strengthened their understanding of inequality, unemployment, governance, the political economy, and more recently, extractivism and climate justice.

The participatory format has proved to be effective. Participants are not passive recipients of knowledge, but actively participate in shaped discussions, engage in creative sessions, and link theory to lived realities. The shift to a five-day residential format has significantly deepened engagement, improved attendance, and enabled

participation from across the country. It has also strengthened solidarity and networking among the participants.

Sustainability remains a major challenge. The school operates without staff, stable funding, or infrastructure, and relies heavily on voluntary commitment and limited external support. The initial monthly sessions faced irregular attendance, and although the residential format has improved consistency, it requires greater financial and logistical resources. The long-term impact of the ESJT Activist School with respect to increased social justice activism is difficult to measure, or predict.

Several important lessons have emerged from the experience thus far:

- 1. Political education remains essential.**

There is a clear hunger among young people for critical discussion about Namibia’s development path. Structured spaces for analysis and debate are urgently needed.

- 2. Participatory learning is more effective than traditional lectures.**

When participants co-create the programme, engage creatively, and relate theory to lived experience, learning becomes

transformational rather than abstract.

3. Residential formats deepen impact.

Immersive learning environments foster stronger relationships amongst the participants, strengthen collective identity, and sustain reflection on the issues discussed.

4. Intergenerational dialogue matters.

The involvement of experienced activists alongside younger participants strengthens continuity between past struggles and current challenges.

5. Flexibility is crucial.

The school must remain responsive to changing socio-economic realities, whether related to the political economy, climate change, extractivism, or new forms of activism.

The Future of the ESJT Activist School

Looking ahead, the activist school intends to consolidate the residential course as its primary format, broaden participation from all the regions, and strengthen networks among alumni to sustain activism beyond

the programme itself. It also seeks to deepen engagement with issues such as climate justice, extractivism and alternative development strategies, while encouraging participants to initiate practical interventions within their own communities. At the same time, efforts will be made to secure modest and sustainable funding without compromising the school's independence.

In order to build on the work done in past schools, it will be useful to introduce advanced follow-up modules for participants, to publish reflections and research emerging from the programme, and to build stronger connections between activism, academic inquiry, and policy engagement.

In a context marked by persistent inequality, high youth unemployment, ecological pressures, and growing political disillusionment, spaces that nurture critical consciousness and collective agency are urgently needed. While the ESJT Activist School does not claim to provide definitive solutions, it represents a modest, yet meaningful contribution towards rebuilding an engaged and socially conscious group of activists who are committed to economic and social justice.

Conclusion

The experiences of the activist school demonstrate that political

education remains both relevant and necessary in Namibia. By creating spaces for dialogue, critical analysis and creative engagement, the initiative contributes to renewing traditions of active citizenship that were central to the country's liberation struggle. Its impact may not always be immediately measurable, but its value lies in cultivating informed, reflective and courageous individuals and groups who are capable of shaping future struggles for justice. In this sense, the activist school is not an end in itself, but part of an ongoing process of building a more democratic, equitable and socially just Namibia.

Review of the Namibia State of Skills Demand and Supply Report

Christophina Ndahambelela Ainima

Introduction

Skills development has become a central policy instrument in Namibia's pursuit of inclusive growth, economic diversification, and employment creation. In a context marked by persistently high youth unemployment, deep educational inequality, and a labour market characterised by informality and underemployment, skills policy is increasingly framed as a pathway to social inclusion and economic participation. The Namibia State of Skills Demand and Supply Report 2025 (NSSDSR) (Namibia Investment Promotion and Development Board [NIPDB], 2025) emerges within this context as a comprehensive attempt to diagnose skills shortages across key productive sectors, and to align education, training, and innovation systems with Namibia's long-term development ambitions.

Drawing on sectoral analysis and stakeholder consultations, the NSSDSR identifies critical skills gaps across advanced manufacturing, engineering, pharmaceuticals, food processing, and other technology-intensive sectors

associated with the “fourth industrial revolution”¹ (NSSDSR, 2025). Rather than treating these shortages as isolated occupational deficits, the report characterises these gaps as systemic, linking them to weaknesses in hands-on industrial training, outdated and insufficiently responsive curricula, and limited integration between educational institutions and employers (NSSDSR, 2025). The report further notes that skills development is constrained by broader structural factors, including limited access to appropriate technology, high capital costs, and underdeveloped innovation ecosystems (NSSDSR, 2025). In this sense, the report provides a detailed and credible diagnosis of Namibia's skills landscape. It makes a compelling case for reforming vocational education,

1 The fourth industrial revolution has been described as “the blurring of boundaries between the physical, digital, and biological worlds ... a fusion of advances in artificial intelligence (AI), robotics, the Internet of Things (IoT), Web3, blockchain, 3D printing, genetic engineering, quantum computing, and other technologies” (McGinnis, 2023).

strengthening technical training, and improving coordination across state, industry, and research institutions.

This review assesses the NSSDSR within the broader framework of access to “education for liberation”. While empirically robust, the report remains predominantly supply-side oriented. Skills shortages are framed mainly as mismatches between educational outputs and labour-market demand, with emphasis on curriculum reform and institutional responsiveness. Although the NSSDSR recognises poverty, geographic exclusion, and gender

inequality, these are treated primarily as contextual constraints rather than as structural outcomes of Namibia’s postcolonial political economy, shaped by enduring inequalities in land, industry, and technology ownership. As a result, the deeper conditions shaping who can access skills, which forms of knowledge are socially valued, and whether the economy can absorb skilled labour remain insufficiently theorised.

The argument advanced here is not that skills reform is misplaced, but that it is insufficient as a standalone strategy for transformation. When education is



positioned primarily as a mechanism for labour market alignment within an economy still marked by structural dependence and limited productive diversification, there is the risk that the burden of adjustment will shift onto learners themselves. Read through a social justice lens, the NSSDSR raises a fundamental question: Can expanded access to skills training amount to liberation in the absence of structural changes that secure dignified work? The transformative potential of skills policy ultimately depends on its integration with broader industrial and demand-side strategies that expand productive capacity and redistribute economic risk.

Report Overview

The 2025 NSSDSR presents a comprehensive national assessment of skills availability, labour market demand, and education system performance. Framed as a strategic planning instrument, the report seeks to align skills development with Namibia's long-term development objectives, including Vision 2030, industrial diversification, and emerging sectors linked to the green and digital transitions.

Drawing on labour market data, education system indicators, and stakeholder consultations, the NSSDSR highlights a persistent paradox: high national unemployment, estimated at 36.9 percent, with youth unemployment

at 44.4 percent, coexists alongside reported shortages of technical and specialised skills. Employers across manufacturing, agriculture, engineering, and technology-intensive sectors cite difficulties in sourcing appropriately trained workers, particularly in mid- to high-level technical occupations.

The report attributes this mismatch to systemic weaknesses across the education and training pipeline. These include poor learning outcomes at the secondary level, low completion rates in technical fields, high attrition in TVET (technical and vocational education and training) institutions, outdated curricula, and limited opportunities for work-based learning. The NSSDSR further notes that institutional fragmentation and weak data systems impede effective skills forecasting and planning. Notably, the report acknowledges that skills development operates within broader structural constraints, including limited technological capacity, high capital costs, and under-developed innovation ecosystems.

In response, the report proposes a set of policy interventions to improve skills alignment, including reforming TVET and higher education curricula, incentivising STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) enrolment, expanding internships and work-based learning, strengthening labour market data systems, and

enhancing institutional coordination through sector-based committees. At its core, the report envisions a more integrated and demand-responsive skills system capable of supporting economic diversification and improving employment outcomes.

Structural Inequality and the Social Filtering of Skills Access

A central contribution of the NSSDSR is its recognition that skills shortages arise across the education and training pipeline, rather than solely at the point of labour market entry. Rather than locating failure exclusively within post-school institutions, the report traces constraints back to foundational stages of education, identifying poor learning outcomes, weak progression pathways, and uneven access to technical and vocational training as systemic sources of skills scarcity (NIPDB, 2025). This framing marks a significant departure from narrow labour market analyses that treat skills gaps as isolated occupational mismatches.

The most severe bottleneck identified by the report occurs at the secondary school level. The report documents that nearly 80 per cent of learners fail to achieve adequate results in national examinations, substantially limiting eligibility for tertiary education and technical fields (NIPDB, 2025). This underperformance functions as an early

structural filter that sharply narrows the pool of learners able to pursue qualifications in engineering, manufacturing, and other priority sectors. Although the NSSDSR notes that these outcomes are unevenly distributed across income levels and geographic location, the social mechanisms through which this filtering occurs remain largely implicit.

These early exclusions are reflected downstream in completion patterns. Despite manufacturing and agriculture accounting for a significant share of employment, completions in manufacturing- and engineering-related fields remain negligible, at approximately 0.03 percent of total graduates (NIPDB, 2025). The report attributes this imbalance to institutional factors, including outdated curricula, limited practical training opportunities, and weak coordination between education providers and industry (NIPDB, 2025). By locating responsibility at the level of system design rather than individual motivation, the report avoids moralising failure and reinforces the need for coordinated reform.

What remains underexamined, however, is how these institutional failures operate as mechanisms of social selection. Access to skills is not simply a matter of formal enrolment, but one of who can navigate, endure, and complete lengthy, resource-intensive training pathways. Education systems

reward particular forms of knowledge, language, and social familiarity, privileging learners who possess the cultural resources necessary to convert access into completion and certification (Bourdieu, 1984). Learners lacking these forms of cultural capital face heightened risks of attrition, even in contexts where access has formally expanded.

The NSSDSR itself identifies long training durations, limited geographic access to institutions, and the absence of income support during study as significant barriers to participation in technical fields (NIPDB, 2025). Yet these constraints are treated primarily as logistical challenges, rather than as distributive mechanisms that systematically shape differential capacity to remain within the skills pipeline.

From the perspective of access to education for liberation, this distinction matters. When structural inequalities in household income, location, and prior schooling influence the ability to acquire technical qualifications, expanded enrolment does not automatically translate into meaningful access. Skills shortages, in this sense, are not only technical deficits but outcomes of socially filtered educational pathways within a highly unequal society. Without addressing the material conditions that determine who can

convert educational opportunity into certification and employment, reforms aimed at alignment risk reproducing exclusion within the very system they seek to strengthen.

Cultural Capital, Aspiration, and the Social Valuation of Skills

The NSSDSR observes persistent enrolment pressure in traditionally prestigious fields such as business, education, and public sector-oriented qualifications, alongside weak uptake of technical and vocational pathways linked to manufacturing, agro-processing, and engineering (NIPDB, 2025). The report broadly interprets this pattern as a problem of information and incentives, suggesting that learners are insufficiently guided toward sectors with stronger labour demand.

This interpretation, while plausible, may underestimate the extent to which broader labour market conditions shape educational aspirations. In contexts of high unemployment and limited social protection, qualification choices often reflect strategies of risk management rather than simple misalignment. As argued by Bourdieu (1984), education systems confer cultural capital that signals social worth, making some qualifications attractive not because they guarantee employment, but because they offer symbolic security.

Taking this into consideration, preferences for “prestigious” degrees reflect rational responses to a labour market in which technical and industrial sectors are associated with instability, geographic concentration, or uncertain progression; learners may therefore prefer credentials perceived to offer greater security or social recognition.

The NSSDSR itself provides indirect evidence that supports this interpretation. It identifies long training durations, limited institutional access, and the absence of income support during study as barriers to technical enrolment (NIPDB, 2025). These factors raise the private costs of participation, particularly for students from low-income households. When combined with an economy whose absorptive capacity remains constrained, the perceived risks of pursuing specialised technical training increase further.

From this perspective, the issue is not merely one of signalling or behavioural correction, but of how different forms of work are materially structured and socially valued. Redirecting learners toward technical pathways without improving the stability, recognition, and progression associated with such work may have a limited effect. Aspirations cannot be transformed through information alone; they are embedded within lived experiences

of labour market insecurity. Without addressing the structural conditions that shape both opportunity and risk, efforts to recalibrate educational preferences may reproduce rather than resolve existing inequalities.

Skills Policy without Demand: The Political Economy Constraint

A defining feature of the NSSDSR is its emphasis on aligning skills supply with labour market demand. Skills shortages are mainly presented as coordination failures that can be corrected through curriculum reform, institutional alignment, and more responsive training systems (NIPDB, 2025). Within this logic, education and skills development are positioned as the primary levers of economic transformation, capable of unlocking productivity, competitiveness, and inclusive growth.

However, the report’s own findings point to a more constrained demand environment. The NSSDSR repeatedly acknowledges that Namibia’s economy remains limited in its capacity to absorb skilled labour, particularly in technologically intensive and value-adding sectors. Weak industrial ecosystems, high capital costs, limited domestic machinery production, and fragmented innovation systems are identified as structural constraints on firm expansion and diversification

(NIPDB, 2025). These conditions restrict not only job creation, but also firms' ability to invest in training and sustained skills upgrading.

Evidence from broader assessments of Namibia's productive structure reinforces this concern. Firms frequently cite skills shortages, yet these coexist with binding constraints related to technology access, equipment costs, infrastructure limitations, and weak productive capabilities (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 2026). Under such conditions, demand for skilled labour is itself structurally constrained: firms cannot expand or upgrade production sufficiently to absorb specialised skills at scale. Skills shortages and limited productive capacity, therefore, interact as a dual bottleneck, suppressing both employment growth and skills utilisation.

The NSSDSR recognises elements of this tension but stops short of advancing a robust demand-side policy agenda. While institutional reform and improved alignment are necessary, they cannot, on their own, generate the industrial dynamism required to sustain large-scale technical employment. When skills development is tasked with compensating for structural weaknesses in productive capacity, the burden of adjustment shifts toward individuals and training

institutions rather than toward industrial transformation.

In this context, expanding technical training in an economy with constrained absorptive capacity risks raising expectations without securing livelihoods. Education can prepare individuals for opportunities; however, it cannot create those opportunities in the absence of coordinated industrial and technological policy. The transformative promise of skills development, therefore, depends not only on better alignment, but also on expanding the material conditions under which skilled work can be generated and sustained.

Education, Liberation, and the Limits of Skills-Led Policy

Throughout the NSSDSR, education is framed primarily as an instrument for improving employability, productivity, and adaptability. Learners are positioned as future contributors to economic competitiveness, and their success depends on the alignment of their skills with evolving labour market demand. This framing is operationally coherent and consistent with strategic economic planning. Yet it raises a deeper question: What kind of subject is produced by training that is aligned to the skills policy?

By emphasising responsiveness and adaptability, the NSSDSR locates

transformation primarily within the education system and the individual learner. While the report acknowledges structural economic constraints, its policy remedies focus predominantly on improving institutional efficiency and workforce readiness. In contexts where labour demand remains limited, such an approach risks shifting the burden of adjustment onto individuals who must continuously reskill to stay employable.

As Freire (1970/2005) cautioned, education oriented primarily toward adaptation may reproduce existing hierarchies rather than transform them. Liberation entails not only access to training but also the ability to convert learning into secure and dignified livelihoods where employment opportunities remain structurally constrained; expanding skills provision alone cannot guarantee such outcomes.

The NSSDSR makes an essential contribution by clarifying skills mismatches and institutional fragmentation. However, its transformative promise depends on situating skills development within a broader agenda that addresses job creation, industrial expansion, and social protection. Without this integration, education risks becoming a mechanism for managing economic risk at the individual level rather than redistributing it collectively.

Conclusion

The NSSDSR offers a rigorous and policy-relevant diagnosis of Namibia's skills landscape, identifying systemic weaknesses across the education and training pipeline and advancing a coherent reform agenda. Its contribution lies in clarifying institutional coordination failures and foregrounding the need for more responsive and integrated skills planning.

This review has argued that while these reforms are necessary, they are insufficient when framed primarily through a supply-side lens. Skills shortages in Namibia are embedded within broader structural conditions shaped by unequal access to education, socially differentiated risk, and an economy with limited capacity to absorb specialised labour. Without confronting these constraints, improvements in alignment may expand training opportunities without fundamentally altering employment outcomes.

For skills policy to contribute meaningfully to education for liberation, it must be situated within a wider developmental project that links education reform to industrial expansion, job creation, and social protection. Education can prepare individuals for opportunity, but liberation requires that such opportunities materially exist. The enduring challenge for Namibia is

therefore not only to align skills with demand, but to transform the economic conditions under which skilled work can be generated, recognised, and sustained.

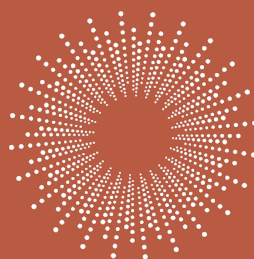
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