

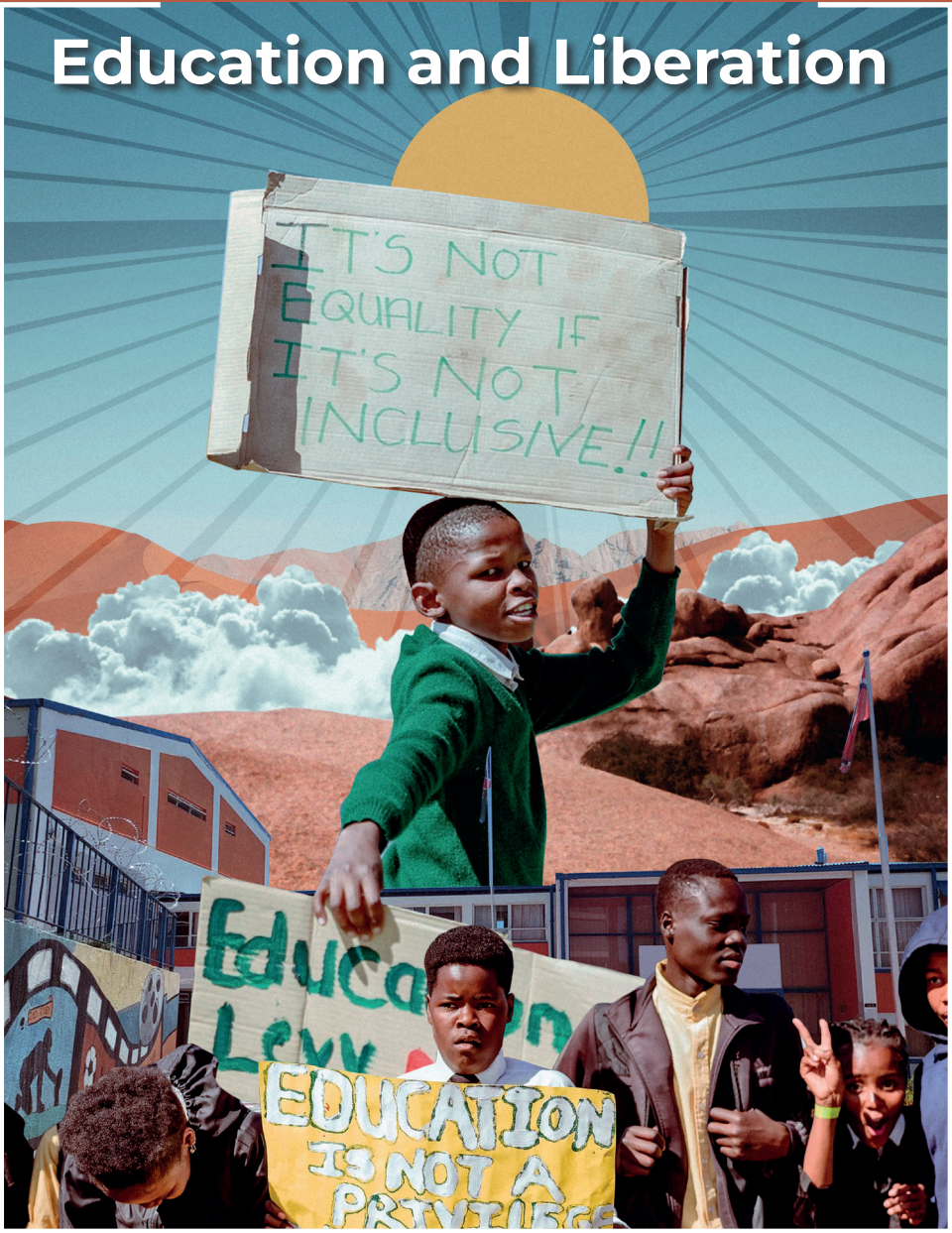
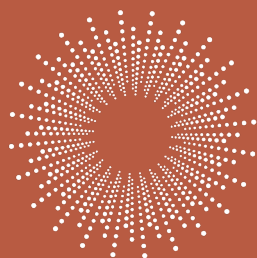


Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	4
Acronyms and Initialisms	5
Editorial: Education and Liberation	7
The Quest for Education for Liberation: The Case of the Namibia National Students Organisation	20
<i>Ndumba J. Kamwanyah</i>	
A Case Study of Radical Pedagogy in Practice: The South African Committee for Higher Education (SACHED) and Regional Liberation Networks (1959–1994)	26
<i>Tammy-Lee Lakay</i>	
Challenges that Outsmart the Transformation Agenda: An Analysis of Why Certain Challenges Persist in the Namibian Education System Despite Several Reforms.....	43
<i>John Nyambe, Marius Kudumo, & Ellison Tjirera</i>	
Social Justice and Education in Namibia: From Theory to Practice	69
<i>Lucy Edwards-Jauch</i>	
Education for All? Unpacking Social Justice and Grassroots Policy Implementation: A Case Study of the Otjituu Settlement	97
<i>Tjipura Tjipura</i>	
Beyond Colonialities: Leveraging Ubuntu for Transformative Higher Education in Namibia.....	105
<i>Bruno Venditto & Adalbertus Kamanzi</i>	
Epistemic Destruction and Indigenous Knowledge Loss During the OvaHerero/Nama Genocide (1904–1908): A Case study of OvaHerero Epistemicide	137
<i>Kahuhu Alphons Koruhama & Joyce Muzengua</i>	

Epistemological Access at the Institutions of Teacher Education.....	148
<i>Fares Amweenye, Sakaria M. Iipinge & Elizabeth Ngololo</i>	
The Relevance of Theological Education in Contemporary Namibia: A Contextual Analysis of the United Lutheran Theological Seminary–Paulinum..	173
<i>Emma N. Nangolo</i>	
Critical Pedagogies in Anti-Colonial Cultural Work: Oudano as Praxis.....	198
<i>Nashilongweshipwe Mushaandja</i>	
Decolonising Early Childhood Development in Informal Settlements: A Case Study of New Elementary Namibia and the Implementation of the Sixth National Development Plan	218
<i>Kevin Wessels</i>	
A Case Study of Parenting a Neurodivergent Child Juxtaposed against the Provisions of the Sector Policy on Inclusive Education in Namibia.....	229
<i>Immaculate Mogotsi & Christel Menette</i>	
Case Study: Bridging the Gender Gap in Education in Zambezi Region, Namibia.....	256
<i>Phiona Nandu</i>	
Political Worker Education in Namibia: The Case of the Labour Diploma Course.....	262
<i>Herbert Jauch</i>	
Dissecting the Subsidised Funding Model in Namibia 2026: Free Registration and the Question of Sustainable Access to Higher Education	269
<i>Benhard Kavau</i>	
Contributing towards Social Justice in Namibia? The Activist School of the Economic and Social Justice Trust.....	274
<i>Herbert Jauch & Nafimane Hamukoshi</i>	
Review of the Namibia State of Skills Demand and Supply Report.....	281
<i>Christophina Ndahambelela Ainima</i>	

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.

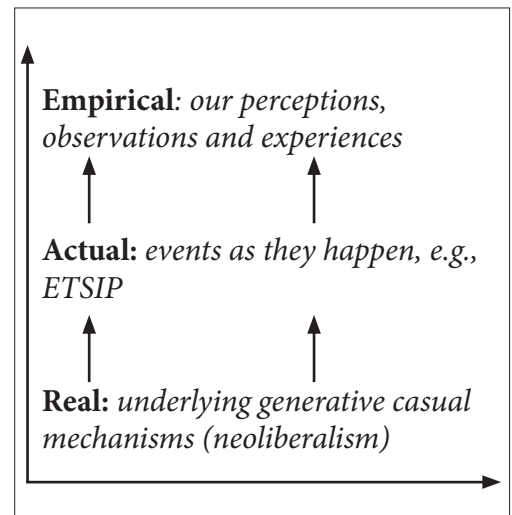
Bhaskar's theory provides the next level to be explored, which is the level of the *actual*. This level consists of the objective world of events, which includes all things that happen, even if we do not experience them. The level of the *actual* is about existing events or phenomena. For instance, this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