

## *How inclusive is Namibia's inclusive education policy?*

### **Overview**

The Namibian Sector Policy on Inclusive Education (MoE 2013) was prepared in response to national and international legal frameworks that addressed the need to create an educational environment conducive to learning for all children in the country. The policy document clearly considers educational exclusion primarily with reference to a disability (or exceptional ability) of some kind or the socioeconomic status of a learner. This policy brief examines the scope of Namibia's inclusive education policy and suggests revisions to make it more comprehensive. It is based on a study conducted in primary schools in Namibia's Kunene region that was designed to understand people's lived experiences with respect to multiculturalism in the school setting. The brief contends that to truly serve its purpose, the policy should be informed by the most current research while also being aligned with the national legislative frameworks and international conventions that Namibia has ratified. The policy would be more comprehensive and appropriate if it looked at varied intersecting categories of difference that can be used for othering (differentiation) in the school environment. In addition to focusing on the groups of children who face difficulties in accessing mainstream

education as a result of their economic situation or special needs, the policy should also consider learners whose marginalisation at school has sources in more subtle sociocultural factors.

### **Introduction**

The Sector Policy on Inclusive Education approved by Namibia's Cabinet in 2013 aims at accommodating different educational needs in a learner-centred school setting in order to make education in the country inclusive, sensitive and responsive. The development of the document was guided by a number of national policies, such as the Policy Options for the Educationally Marginalised Children (2000), the National Policy on Disability (1997) and the Education Sector Policy for Orphans and Vulnerable Children (2008).

Namibia's inclusive education policy is also informed by international conventions and declarations – the most directly applicable being the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), the Jomtien World Declaration on Education for All (1990) and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006). The policy document itself espouses the definition of inclusive education from UNESCO's *Guidelines for Inclusion: Ensuring Access to Education for All*, which speaks of:

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*. It involves *changes and modifications in content, approaches, structures and strategies*, with a common vision which covers all children of the appropriate age range and a conviction that it is the responsibility of the regular system to educate all children. (UNESCO 2005: 13; emphasis added)

Despite its broad general scope, the policy in question clearly focuses specifically on educationally marginalised children as defined in the Policy Options for the Educationally Marginalised Children from year 2000;<sup>1</sup> the few additions to that early list include children who are gifted/ talented, children with emotional and behavioural challenges, as well as learners in a difficult economic situation. It should be noted that the Policy Options for the Educationally Marginalised Children is based on an analysis of school enrolment rates and statistics on children who dropped out of school. Its main concern is thus the accessibility of education. It touches slightly on the issue of discrimination against children from certain cultural backgrounds by their peers and teachers (as in the case of San children), but other than that, the non-economic reasons for marginalisation are not discussed in the document.

1 The Policy Options for the Educationally Marginalised Children considers the following groups of children as marginalised: children of farmworkers; children in remote rural areas; 'street' children; children in squatter, resettlement and refugee camps; children who are considered 'over-aged' in the current education policies; working children; children with special educational needs; orphans; young offenders; and teenage mothers.

Accordingly, in its present form the Sector Policy on Inclusive Education is also concerned mostly with children who are left out of schooling, as it looks at conditions that hinder school enrolment. At the same time, it ignores other intersecting components of the process of differentiation (othering – see box), such as race, ethnicity, gender and gender identity, and the many aspects of culture (e.g. language, religion) that are often a source of exclusion or discrimination even if they do not prevent learners from attending classes per se. The policy alludes to these categories of difference when speaking of the 'girl-child' and 'children in remote areas' (a term that denotes San and Ovahimba children only), but does not delve deeply into the sources of exclusion of these particular groups.

### Quality for all through the inclusion of the marginalised

The origins of an inclusive education approach lie partly in the discourse on special needs in education and the imperative to provide quality education to children with disabilities. Therefore, the particular focus of the inclusive education policy on learners with physical and mental impairments is not surprising. Currently, however, the concept is being approached from a wider perspective endorsed by the Education for All movement, to which Namibia belongs as a signatory of the Jomtien World Declaration on Education for All (1990). The objectives of Education for All have been also set as a goal in Vision 2030, a strategic plan developed for the country.

The Education for All movement seeks to create a school environment that is 'inclusive of children, effective with children, friendly and welcoming to children, healthy and protective of children and gender sensitive' (UNESCO 2005: 10). The list of educationally marginalised or excluded children

created for the purpose of the Education for All agenda is much broader than the one presented in the Namibian Policy Options for the Educationally Marginalised Children. It includes not only children who are deemed to be vulnerable or who are excluded due to physical conditions such as poverty, disability, and abuse, but also learners who are marginalised on account of their sociocultural background, i.e. religious, ethnic and language minorities, or nomadic children (UNESCO 2005: 11).

The spectrum of the forms of educational marginalisation considered by Education for All follows the UNESCO conceptualisation of inclusive education as instruction that should benefit all children and not only focus on those who are already left out. Consequently, inclusive education should also make provisions for children who attend school but may *feel* excluded or are *at risk* of marginalisation due to an unfavourable school climate. The idea issues from the view that diversity of any kind should be treated as a positive factor that can stimulate the learning process, and not as a hindrance.

### Othering

'Othering' is a multidimensional process of differentiation in which intersecting identity constructs – such as race, ethnicity, gender, class, religion, able-bodiedness, sexuality, geographic locality (north/south, urban/rural), etc. – are used to categorise people (Jensen 2009). These categories of difference do not exist in isolation but shape one another in different ways depending on the context. Therefore, when speaking about the process of othering and exclusion in education, an intersectional approach (Crenshaw 1991) is critical for tackling the issue in a comprehensive manner. Looking at educational marginalisation of children only through a socioeconomic lens may result in important, though less obvious, factors being missed.

Schools must take into consideration diversity among learners at multiple levels – emotional, cognitive, cultural, social, economic, etc. – in order to provide every individual with education relevant to his or her needs.

Implementation of inclusive education should lead to a shift from rote learning to experience-based, learner-centred schools, and as a result the quality of education should also improve. Inclusive education and quality education are intrinsically linked. To achieve inclusiveness and thus gain on quality, improvements must take place on two levels: the level of the system that regulates education, and the societal level. Existing attitudes and perceptions that show a lack of understanding for difference need to be addressed, for 'reforming school systems to become inclusive is not only about putting in place recently-developed inclusive policies that meet the needs of all learners, but also about changing the culture of classrooms, schools, districts and universities' (UNESCO 2005: 20).

### **Othering and exclusion within Namibian schools**

It should be noted that cultural relevance was regarded as one of the main objectives of the educational reforms that were initiated in Namibia after independence. Consequently, curriculum and syllabi were reworked to become more pertinent to the realities of people from different cultural backgrounds, and the re-education of teachers was sought with a view to making schools inclusive environments suitable for learning for the whole population. Learner-centred pedagogy combined with inclusive education was introduced as a framework for quality education. The changes brought up by the reforms were informed by the Constitution of Namibia (1990) and the Education Act (2001) that guaranteed

the right to impartial, quality and democratic education.

Yet, although the intentions of educational policies can be reformed quite quickly, the societal context and the cultures within schools are much more difficult to change. Recent research by Brown (2015) and Bialostocka (2015, 2016) shows that gaps persist between rhetoric and reality in terms of ensuring access to schooling that does not discriminate on any grounds, be it cultural or ethnic background, economic or social status, religion, language, gender, and so on.

### ***Pride and prejudice***

The study by Brown (2015), among the first in Namibia focusing on the lived experience of gender non-conforming learners in the school environment, documents the trauma of children who experienced homophobic bullying by their peers and teachers. Perceived to be different in terms of gender, the young people were subjected to verbal and physical abuse, such as name calling, stone throwing or beating. Unattended to by school authorities, these violations often led the learners to drop out and discontinue their education.

Brown (2015) points out that the discrimination and exclusion of transgender children is linked to strong cultural and religious messages present in the society. These messages go against contemporary scientific thinking which asserts that gender identity should be perceived as a continuum with masculine and feminine at its ends, rather than a binary based on man-woman sex categories (ASSAf 2015: 17).

The issue of the lack of a proper response to documented homophobic bullying is particularly noteworthy, the more so because some school authorities suggested that the learners'

behaviour was to blame in the first place (Brown 2015). This showed that these educational institutions were managed according to the rule that it is the child that needs to be tailored to the education system, not the other way around. Meanwhile, UNESCO's understanding on the matter is straightforward: 'it is not our education system that has a right to certain types of children. It is the school system of a country that must be adjusted to meet the needs of all children' (UNESCO 2005: 13).

Bialostocka's research (2015) confirms what Brown (2015) alludes to: that individual religious beliefs influence teachers' behaviour and inform their pedagogy in ways that sometimes contradict the official school policy. According to the latter, not only is corporal punishment prohibited in Namibian classrooms, but learning should take place in an interfaith, unprejudiced environment. The study conducted in Kunene shows that some instructors are openly reluctant to teach about beliefs and norms that they do not share. Often ignorant of other religions and value systems, they subconsciously indoctrinate learners into their own mindset. Part of the problem is evidently the incorrect association of religious and moral education classes with a religion course rather than viewing these classes as designed to introduce children to ethical and philosophical dimensions of world religious systems, and thus to assist them in understanding diversity.

### ***Other – different from the mainstream***

Bialostocka (2016) demonstrates that othering within education in Namibia is prevalent and can actually affect any child. Othering was observed in a culturally heterogeneous school milieu as well as in classes attended by learners coming from the same

background. Depending on school locality, demographic distribution of learners in a class, or teacher abilities to work with diversity, any child could be 'singled out' from the mainstream on the basis of colour, ethnicity, gender, the outfit he or she was wearing (traditional or school uniform), the village or town the child lived in, or the place in the social hierarchy that his or her cultural group occupied. The study thus proves that othering happens on many levels contingent on the context. Different tensions between ethnic and cultural groups, subgroups, or even villages could become a source of othering and exclusion.

One of the most common yet disturbing practices observed was the 'habit' of addressing others using their ethnic group name that carried a specific, usually negative, connotation (Bialostocka 2016). People's self-identity was thus ignored, their personality being seen through their cultural affiliation and the social status attributed to their group. As a result, individual behaviour was often explained as a consequence of cultural upbringing. The practice, which projected an individual's personality as a feature of a tribe or a cultural group, led to far-reaching generalisations and the creation of stereotypes. Feelings or attitudes towards an individual were thus used as a basis for bias that could affect an entire community.

## Conclusion

The Policy on Inclusive Education in Namibia seems to miss a significant point that the concept of inclusive education champions: the crucial issue of different developmental paths and the importance of attuning pedagogy, school strategy and learning resources to the varied sociocultural needs of learners. The process of inclusion is not, as the policy itself says, 'about technical intervention but about change in one's

attitudes to differences' (MoE 2013: 7). The idea is to provide each and every learner with education of a specific kind – one that will enable learners to grow to reach their full potential and acquire skills in accordance with their self-identity.

Consequently, the factors that have been impeding the school attendance of children listed in the policy from 2000 are not necessarily the same as those that may hinder the educational success of current learners. In both instances we speak of marginalisation – in the first case, 'from education'; and in the second, 'within education'. In the latter, the 'sidelining' or othering is based on sociocultural rather than economic background and is often grounded in normative assumptions and power relations functioning in the society.

## Policy implications

1. The Sector Policy on Inclusive Education, while conversant with other policies in place and corresponding with national legislation and international conventions, should be based on and informed by policy-oriented research and not exclusively shaped by policies and conventions themselves, as these may be outdated or not context-specific. 'Governments have a duty to consider scientific perspectives and draw on the most current scientific knowledge when creating policy and enacting laws' (ASSAf 2015: 22).
2. Policy-oriented research into educational exclusion should be commissioned by the government to review and update the list of educationally marginalised children developed in the year 2000 and reused in the policy in question.
3. The list of marginalised children in the Sector Policy on Inclusive Education should be revised

in line with the most recent research findings and extended to encompass learners who are vulnerable to discrimination and exclusion 'within education' on the grounds of the sociocultural components of their identity. Thus, the policy would be broadened to include the full spectrum of the concept of inclusive education as defined by the Education for All movement.

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