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Inclusive education in marginalised contexts: the San and Ovahimba learners in Namibia

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Introduction

One of Namibia's outstanding sociocultural characteristics is the ethnic heterogeneity of its inhabitants, which stands at 25 distinct groups. The indigenous minority groups include the Kwe, Hai-dom, Joehansi and Khu groups, who are informally known as San communities, and the Himba, Zemba, and Ovatue, who among others¹ are part of the Ovahimba communities, which predominantly practice hunter-gathering and pastoral livestock farming. Historically, Namibia's education system was divided along racial lines, with Blacks classified in an order of importance where the San and Ovahimba people were in the lowest categories. In this apartheid system Whites and Coloureds received unending privileges at the expense of the indigenous Namibians, of which the Ovahimba and the San communities were the worst affected.² When independence dawned in 1990, it signified political freedom long awaited by many. Since then the government has been dedicated to the process of educational transformation to bring about equitable access to quality education for all Namibians. This process included significant initiatives such as recognition of the San as an 'educationally marginalised group', emphasis on mother tongue education, use of satellite and mobile schools for Ovahimba learners, and Namibia's *Sector Policy on Inclusive Education*. This chapter will examine the policy measures that the Namibian government has put in place to create an inclusive education environment.

By using a qualitative design, we take a multifaceted approach to examining and analysing social patterns and culture, reasons for low education outcomes, practices in schools to enhance inclusivity, educators' perspectives on the San and Ovahimba children's participation in education, strategies to secure inclusive, equitable and quality education, and policy implementation perspectives. Table 1 shows that latest data on the Namibian languages and percentage of distribution.

Table 1: Namibian Language and percentage distribution, 2001–11

Main language	2001	2011
Oshiwambo	48.5	48.9
Nama/Damara	11.5	11.3
Afrikaans	11.4	10.4
Otjiherero (includes Himba, Zemba, etc.)	7.9	8.6
Kavango	9.7	8.5
Lozi	5.0	4.8
English	1.9	3.4
German	1.1	0.9
San	1.2	0.8
Other	1.8	2.4

Source: 2001 and 2011 Population and Housing Census³

Inclusive education: context, contextual framework and values

Namibia is committed to the achievement of inclusive education through the implementation of international and national directives and policy instruments that guide education provisions, such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (2015). Notably, the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action (1994) reinforced that schools must accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions. This included children who were gifted and talented, those with disabilities, those with other difficulties such as street children and working children, children from remote or nomadic populations, children from linguistic, ethnic or cultural minorities, and children from other disadvantaged or marginalised areas or groups. These provisions, alongside the *Sector Policy on Inclusive Education*, ensure the education system is inclusive, sensitive and responsive to the needs of all children and that all children receive the same education irrespective of where they are in the country.

The inclusive education philosophy is premised on the expectation that schools should become centres in which diversity is viewed positively and not as a challenge and where all learners can develop and thrive.

Rather than being a marginal issue on how some learners can be integrated in mainstream education, inclusive education is an approach that looks into how to transform education systems and other learning environments in order to respond to the diversity of learners.

UNESCO⁴

Characteristics of inclusive education

According to the Ministry of Education's *Sector Policy on Inclusive Education*,⁵ inclusive education can be achieved by focusing on capacitation and mainstreaming. It states that 'Inclusive education can be seen as a process of strengthening the capacity of an education system to reach out to all learners'. In other words, if more and more learners from marginalised groups have access to education, the ministry can argue that they are achieving their aim. However, such an approach does not consider the many issues relating to the provision of inclusive education for marginalised groups.

This marginalisation is clearly visible in the education of the San and Ovahimba learners as can be seen from retention rates, which have remained low at upper primary and higher levels.⁶ A 2011 UNICEF study that assessed trends in quality and equity in education confirmed that primary school enrolment for the general population was relatively high at 90.9 per cent (90.5 per cent of males, and 91.3 per cent of females). However, attendance rates were lowest in Kunene (56.2 per cent), Otjozondjupa (82.1 per cent), Omaheke (83.9 per cent) and Kavango (86.8 per cent).⁷ These figures show that attendance rates were low in areas inhabited by San and Ovahimba communities. Another study by Maarit Thiem and Jennifer Hays revealed that of the San people who attended school and participated in the study, about 90 per cent dropped out before receiving a certificate.⁸ Furthermore, Education Management Information System statistics showed a worrisome decline in San enrolment in upper primary and higher grades.⁹ The Thiem and Hays study found that 36 per cent of the children in their focus group had dropped out by Grade 4, and over half (55.2 per cent) by Grade 6.

The evidence confirms that early drop-out and low education achievement was prevalent with both San and Ovahimba learners, despite an enabling legislative framework. The enactment of Article 20 in the Namibian Constitution stating that 'all persons shall have the right to education'¹⁰ laid the foundation on which all future policy frameworks were to be anchored. In line with this constitutional provision the following were achieved:

- a policy framework that articulated four major goals of education: access, democracy, equality and quality¹¹
- the identification of the educationally marginalised, including San and Ovahimba children, for whom expanded support should be given to enable them to access equitable, quality education¹²
- the establishment of a Department for Marginalised Communities in the Office of the Vice President specifically to target San and Ovahimba inclusion in mainstream society through various primary, secondary and tertiary services.

These policies led to several interventions that underscore the importance of inclusive education for the San and Ovahimba peoples. These included provision for food rations and exemptions of San and Ovahimba learners from paying school-related fees. Furthermore, the implementation of universal free primary education in 2012, followed by free secondary education in 2014, was geared towards total inclusion for all. However, the retention rate for the San and Ovahimba in secondary and post-secondary programmes remains a matter of concern.

Previous research findings

The University of Namibia prioritised knowledge systems as one of the key research areas for the period 2011–16, and various research work focused on the education of the San and Ovahimba communities, such as *Issues facing Ethnic Minority Groups in Namibia: case Studies of the San and Ovahimba in Namibia* and *An Exploration of Quality Inclusive Education in the Pre- and Lower Primary Education Phase in Namibia: the case of one school in the Omaheke region*.¹³ In all schools visited for these research projects, when asked what their understanding of inclusive education was, the majority of teachers responded that it was about 'teaching learners with disabilities in mainstream schools'. The majority also indicated they had no skills to support learners with disabilities.¹⁴ Although listed as a key population of educationally marginalised children, at school level, children from indigenous communities were not recognised by teachers as a special group that called for a different approach. As a result, marginalisation and exclusion of learners from minority ethnic backgrounds mirrors the sociopolitical context of the schools themselves and the society in which those schools are located. The intersection between race, ethnicity and power impedes the successful implementation of inclusive education for learners from a minority ethnic background.

Some schools use subtle forms of rejection hidden in low expectations, jokes, language and 'othering' towards children from marginalised communities, and these forms of symbolic stigma hamper the development of inclusive schools. Therefore, there is a need to reassess pedagogy and socialisation if we are to succeed in creating schools where learners from indigenous communities experience belonging. We argue for post-conflict pedagogy¹⁵ in which those teaching indigenous communities approach their learners with compassion and empathy as opposed to constantly comparing them with others from dominant groups. This pedagogy advocates for continual social engagement¹⁶ between teachers and learners to seek pedagogical interventions that take into consideration different learners and their contexts. This is vital if learners from marginalised communities are to feel accepted and, by implication, find school meaningful.

During our work with the San and Ovahimba, we identified several barriers that hinder success in implementing inclusive education in Namibia. Inclusive policies notwithstanding, Namibian society has not yet undergone transformation towards inclusive cultures, and as a result, learners from minority ethnic backgrounds experience exclusion and stigmatisation throughout their lives. Where the school is supposed to offer a creative space for learning, most schools stick to conventional teaching styles, which do not focus on individual needs but instead view children as a homogeneous group. This hinders Ovahimba and San learners' full participation in education and poses a threat to their inclusion in schools.

Both the Ovahimba and San ethnic groups maintain an oral culture where skills, values, language and folklore are transferred orally from generation to generation and rarely written down. As a result, learners come to school with limited pre-literacy and pre-numeracy skills, and when they arrive they are confronted with books, which creates an immediate culture shock. Similarly, for many learners the culture in both boarding and day schools is very different from that at home and they have to learn to live in two different worlds with different world views. Teachers need to adapt their pedagogical approaches and try to build bridges between these two worlds. Another cultural difference is that the Ovahimba and San cultures are based on the *Ubuntu* philosophy (I am because we are). In this world view, there is no space for individualism; community and families' co-operative work is encouraged, and independent work is discouraged. This group identity also informs how critical thinking is applied where problems are solved as a group, whereas in school, individuals are expected to solve a problem and individual achievement rather than group achievements are rewarded.

There continue to be disparities in terms of school attendance by these two indigenous communities, and the Office of the Vice President has launched a Back to School and Stay in School campaign, which provides transport to and from school for San learners in remote rural communities. The intervention strategies put in place by the government aim to address gaps between the sociohistorical realities of the San and Ovahimba communities and expectations from the schools. This decision was taken because the school as a sociopolitical institution is often perceived by indigenous communities as alien and colonising. Government, on the other hand, sees formal education as an equaliser.

The San and Ovahimba practise indigenous knowledge or traditional education. We know from oral history that indigenous communities such as the Ovahimba and Ovazemba had, before the arrival of Europeans, a highly developed system of education. In their culture, parents, elders and members of the community as a whole taught younger people their skills, norms and values to ensure their education led to a good life. Learning was for living and survival. With the introduction of formal education, there has not been a smooth transition, nor has there been a good strategy of acculturation as opposed to assimilation. Subsequently, what we see today with indigenous communities is a system – the school – at loggerheads with culture.

The Ovahimba¹⁷

The Ovahimba is the largest of several small ethnic groups having more or less the same cultural values and language. They live in the Kunene Region along the far north-western part of Namibia. To improve their school attendance the government, in collaboration with the Namibia Association of Norway, has established mobile school units with food as part of the school feeding programme. The food, which currently consists of porridge, is prepared by the teacher with the support of learners and some parents.

The Ondao Mobile School consists of about 35 mobile units (tents) that move with communities as part of their semi-nomadic lifestyles. More often, migration is prompted by the need to find grazing for their cattle. Each tent has adequate teaching and learning materials. Each school has one or two teachers (mostly from the Himba culture or in a position to understand such culture) and multigrade teaching is common, especially where there is only one teacher for learners who are at different levels both in terms of chronological and developmental age.

Learners live with their parents in their community, and the schedule of the Ondao Mobile School attempts to strike a balance between the curriculum goals as presented in regular schools and the accommodation of local cultural practices (norms and values). One such cultural value is that children attend primary school in their traditional attire. A second aspect that is central among the Ovahimba culture is the emphasis placed on the value of cattle as a source of livelihoods. The Ovahimba therefore often rotate their children's attendance in order to ensure that there is always someone available to take care of the livestock. In one incidence at Ondao Mobile School we observed that a parent came to the school to ask his child to go and find lost cattle. Given the complex nature of extended family structures and the Ubuntu norm, several other children also went to find the cattle. The class size was drastically reduced and much of the lesson had to be repeated the next day – a situation that would amount to misconduct in a regular school.

While mobile school strategies are used at primary level, progression to secondary level is marked with some challenges. Some respondents in our previous research said, 'when learners have to go to secondary schools in towns, away from their parents, many Ovahimba children do not cope and return to the village'. Secondary school is thus viewed as alien by the local communities as one parent recounted: 'They take that road you came with and go to schools far away, and when they are finished with school, they have lost interest in the important things we taught them. They want to remain in towns'.¹⁸ To further demonstrate how a school as an institution is at odds with Ovahimba practices, we can look at one of our field experiences in the Kaokoland, the Ovahimba area of the Kunene Region. In the general education system in Namibia, children start formal schooling aged seven and are thus ten years old in Grade 4. It is however common among indigenous communities for people to start school, drop out to take care of cattle and other traditional chores and then re-enter school. In this case, a 16-year-old boy in Grade 4 narrated how he ran away from home to seek an education and was repeatedly fetched by his parents to go back home to herd cattle. He always escaped and found his way back to school: 'They kept finding out where I am [sic] and my grandfather would send people to fetch me. But I persisted and now he is happy that I can read the prices of goods for him; I can write letters for him!'¹⁹ In this case it can be deduced that when a child is determined to attend school, they can persevere despite family disapproval. Throughout the fieldwork in the two research projects, the researchers observed children of school age who were clearly not in school. When asked why these children were not in school, the parental response was often, 'they herd cattle!' Many other Namibian ethnic groups have adapted to school demands and their culture has adjusted to school calendars, but things are different for indigenous communities (Ovahimba and San) where formal education is still viewed as an obstacle to their natural lifestyles.

According to Jesaja N Ndimwedi the resistance to embrace education may be because traditional education and culture are ignored when planning and designing the formal school curriculum, which leads to learners from indigenous communities regarding schooling as traumatic.²⁰ Juan Bornman and Jill Rose argue that disregarding cultures and structures in communities and not valuing their prior knowledge does not support their inclusion.²¹ The example below illustrates this point by showing a case we encountered with the San people in Bwabwata National Park, north-east Namibia.

The implication of formal education on indigenous knowledge

At independence, the San people (the Khwe) in Bwabwata National Park (then Caprivi Game Park) were strongly encouraged to embrace formal education. The incentive was the provision of food at schools; the 'school feeding programme'. Indeed, many parents sent their children to school and enrolment in primary school increased tremendously. I wanted my students to understand the basic techniques the San people use to identify animal tracks, using time and space. To achieve this objective, on arrival I asked the local headman to lead. He asked the following questions to my students:

1. Which animal is this (pointing at the footprint)?
2. Was it running or walking?
3. If it is running, was it fleeing from a predator or not?
4. Which predator could it be?
5. Is it injured or not?
6. If you were to track it, how long would it take you to find it?
7. When did it pass here?

None of my students could provide correct answers. Then he turned to the young men who had dropped out of school in his village and asked the same questions. None of the young men could answer the questions correctly. Then he turned to me:

You see what formal education has done to us. You told us we must take our children to school. We sent them but the system could not keep them. They then dropped out. They are here and unemployed. Now they have lost on the knowledge from formal education and they have lost the traditional knowledge. What will become of us the San, if this formal education ejects our children?

Khwe elder, Bwabwata²²

The San

Unlike the Ovahimba, the San live in pockets of villages and around more urban areas, often serving as cheap labourers for families on commercial or communal farms and in towns. Mostly, they depend on government rations and grants or on the meagre salaries they receive for their services. They are very vulnerable, to the extent that they sometimes lose their unique identity – particularly during registration for social grants, when they do not have identity documents – as they are often registered with the surnames of the non-San families that accommodate or employ them. This could be a choice, linked to a desire to assimilate with those who are treated with respect.

The San do send their children to school, but with reservations. They do not seem to see the relevance of schooling although they are gradually buying into the idea, and there have been a few success stories. However, the underperformance and dropout rate of San learners remain high. Even in the village school in Tsumkwe, which was specifically created to meet the needs of the San people, it has been observed that there is a general exodus from school when children have reached puberty and their attendance declines with every subsequent grade into secondary school.²³ Full inclusion is based on four pillars: acceptance, presence, participation and achievement.²⁴ Part of the research upon which this chapter is based was conducted at a primary school in the Omaheke Region in Namibia, where San children appeared to be included in the mainstream school we visited. Notwithstanding the obvious pockets of acceptance, many learners indicated that they could not learn in their mother tongue and had to choose one of the languages of the dominant group in their area. We also noted that San learners were not keen to speak their language, even when playing with their peers who spoke the same language or dialect, and they stood out from others as their clothes were either old or too big in size.

The research identified that there are several deep-rooted barriers to education for the San, the first of which is bullying; it was observed that when San learners are bullied by their fellow learners, no appropriate action is taken by teachers and school management. The second is corporal punishment. While this was abolished in Namibia after independence, most of the San learners reported to having been chastised or mistreated by teachers. Third, the lack of mother-tongue orthography raises issues. Not a lot of educational literature is available and unlike their counterparts the Ovahimba, San children have been forced to learn in languages that are not their mother tongue. This is despite Namibia's language policy, which emphasises mother tongue as the language of instruction from Grades 1–3. Linked to this, the lack of trained teachers who are fluent in the San languages remains one of the biggest barriers to inclusivity. There is still a possibility for San learners to be taught by teachers that are conversant in the San language at primary level, but as they progress into secondary education mother tongue teaching starts to disappear and so do teachers with whom they share cultural values. These and many other challenges that are socio-economic, historical and political in nature have served as barriers to education for the majority of San children, forcing them out of school.

At schools where San learners do attend it was observed that their basic physical needs were prioritised when they received donations in the form of food and clothing. However, like the Ovahimba, the San live as a clan, related to each other and sharing everything, so donations of food and clothing are shared among the community. Schools have complained about clothes and blankets donated to boarding school children being left at home when the school resumes after an ‘out-weekend’ or holiday. Learners return to school without the clothes that would allow them to fit in, thus opening them up to criticism and ridicule from their more affluent counterparts. Such material poverty alongside their language access difficulties and inconsistent attendance patterns mean that these San children are stigmatised not only by other learners, but also by some of the teachers. What then should be considered for the basic education system to be inclusive?

Pedagogical considerations

While inclusive education is taught as a core module in teacher training and also as an optional career specialisation, the focus has been largely on learners with disabilities while the teaching and learning of children from minority ethnic groups rarely features as a component.

Universities could consider establishing centres where the issue of indigenous communities’ marginalisation is addressed through research and advocacy. We saw earlier how marginalised communities see the current curriculum as something similar to cultural imperialism because they do not find anything culturally familiar within it. The results from our findings suggest the need for a policy shift in curriculum design toward culturally responsive curriculum development and pedagogy in education. From the perspective of indigenous communities, culturally responsive pedagogy has great potential to decolonise schooling and education.

Culturally responsive teaching

Given what we have described so far, it is imperative that culturally responsive teaching and management approaches be explored if we intend to truly make schools inclusive for marginalised communities. Knowing that responsive teaching can mean anything, we adopt the definition of Geneva Gay, who describes it as ‘a way of using cultural knowledge and prior experiences of diverse learner populations in making learning more useful and understandable’.²⁵ Culturally responsive teaching thus uses cultural knowledge to inform school and classroom practices instead of requiring learners from diverse cultural backgrounds to adapt to ‘school culture’. In the case of San and Ovahimba children, schools should consider these principles suggested by Gay:

- *The facilitator of knowledge acknowledges the legitimacy of the cultural heritages of learners from indigenous communities.* In this case the San and Ovahimba groups.

- *The school should build bridges of meaningfulness through home–school–community partnerships to understand both worlds of the learner and the expectations of parents and communities of the school.* Currently, communities participate in education through formal structures such as the school board. Parents in indigenous communities are elected to serve on the school board, but due to sociohistoric factors, and often their inability to read and write, their contributions are often minimal and they tend to rubber-stamp decisions taken by the school management.
- *The school should consider the ways in which it encourages parental and community engagement with the school.* Schools should consider culturally responsive ways of engaging communities.
- *The school utilises a variety of instructional strategies.* Instructional strategies should enable learners to identify their knowledge in the curriculum. For example, both the San and Ovahimba have interesting ways of counting and these can be used in schools.
- *The school encourages learners to take pride in their cultural heritage including language, norms and values.* One way of doing so is to allow learners to speak their language at school, which is generally restricted, particularly as children progress.
- *The school makes use of multicultural information and resources to help learners make connections between school knowledge and home knowledge.* It has been observed that locally produced materials are minimal and there are barely any books available in the San languages. The University of Namibia did try to find potential teachers in the rare language areas including the San, Khoekhoegowab (a Khoi language of the Damara and Nama people) and Setswana. The plan was to bring them into teacher education by waiving the normal entry requirements for languages, but this process still did not attract enough teachers.

It is suggested that teachers of Ovahimba and San learners should first understand the cultures of the children and treat them and their culture with respect. Although inclusive education has been adopted in principle, there are serious gaps in its implementation, especially for learners from indigenous communities.

Conclusions and recommendations

The authors of this chapter are not arguing for segregation of systems whereby ethnic group-specific schools are created. Ours is a call for the development of culturally responsive pedagogies in which schools adopt cultural sensitivity and avoid having low expectations of learners from indigenous communities. Teacher education should shift its emphasis from a deficit paradigm to one in which all learners are valued and enabled to succeed without having to give up their cultural value systems. There is need for in-depth community-based participatory research with these two communities to inform stakeholders in developing culturally sensitive schools. There is also a need for re-thinking inclusive education by bringing to the forefront the advanced needs of indigenous communities and bridging the gaps between formal and traditional education.

In addition to the above, it is our view that the following steps should be taken to ensure a culturally responsive pedagogy, some of which has been highlighted by the Women's Leadership Centre in Namibia:²⁶

- review of the school curriculum to respond to the needs of the Ovahimba and San children with respect to their culture, norms and values, and the promotion of indigenous knowledge systems
- provide adequate training for teachers, support, content and resources for culturally sensitive teaching methods (this may include cultural and traditional practices, and resources) to strengthen San and Ovahimba children's cultural identities as well as their confidence to learn. This will enable them to progress in line with their peers
- provide adequate materials in the mother tongue for Ovahimba and San learners to enhance inclusivity in teaching and learning, and promote mother tongue as a language of instruction at primary level as required by the national language policy. This will also enhance participation of the indigenous groups in education and promote indigenous Namibian languages
- create safe schools, classrooms and hostels where San and Ovahimba learners feel culturally safe, respected and recognised.

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