**REPUBLIC OF NAMIBIA**

# NATIONAL AND REGIONAL CONSULTATIONS ON TRANSFORMING EDUCATION IN NAMIBIA

## Progress Report



INCLUSIVE, EQUITABLE QUALITY EDUCATION IS A SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

13 June 2022

<p style="text-align:center">Position Paper No. 1</p>

<p style="text-align:center">Inclusive, equitable, safe and healthy schools</p>

## 1. Introduction

This paper is designed to complement the TES Track 1 Paper. That paper is full of statistics, while this paper provides some context and background to the statistics and concerns that the TES paper raises, as well as contextualising to Africa, and specifically Namibia.

Over the last years the focus on the quality of schooling, which is at the heart of Sustainable Development Goal no. 4 (SDG4), has been nuanced with a focus on inclusion and safety, which also draws on SDG10, which talks to inclusion more generally (IIEP 2021). Increasingly there is realisation that quality education is not possible in schools which exclude certain children and youth, do not treat all learners equally irrespective of their race, gender, religion etc., and are not safe and healthy. There is considerable international research that indicates that such schools may produce exemplary exam results for the most academically able, but let other learners down (OECD 2012). Namibia recognised this with the publication of its national Sector Policy on Inclusive Education (Ministry of Education 2013).

There is correlation between the educational outcomes that children achieve and their level of marginalization in a society (American Psychological Association 2022; IIEP 2021; OECD 2012). This is particularly so for indigenous people in societies which have been colonised – as was all of southern central Africa. At the same time as the first sentence of an OECD study into disadvantaged children in schools, states "The highest performing education systems are those that combine equity with quality" (OECD 2012:3). The same report notes that 'disadvantaged schools' tend to reinforce students' socioeconomic inequalities. Gordon Brown talks of the need for "progressive universalism" which combines commitment to every child with more resources targeted to those children who need most resources (International Commission on Financing Global Educational Opportunity 2016:4).

The IIEP (2021) lists the factors which underpin inequalities in education: poverty; parental education and literacy; location of residence (especially rurality); gender; sexual orientation and gender identity; ethnicity, religion and culture; language; conflicts, crises, disaster and displacement. To this comprehensive list, much literature adds disability. All of these have some relevance in Namibia.

## 2. Challenge

The first concern is that being in school is not the same as learning (World Bank 2019). As the World Bank blog states numerous studies have shown that learners in Grade 3 and above in developing countries often cannot read a sentence and cannot enumerate. Essentially, they have learned nothing after sitting in a classroom for years on end. It is therefore not surprising that some learners feel that they are wasting their time and dropout, and parents believe that their children would be better out of school earning a living. And these are often youth who are educatable – they don't have any learning challenge. They were just born in environments where schools are failing.

In addition, it has become increasingly clear that many schools do not treat learners equally, with bias based on gender, race, ability or religion. Exclusion blocks access particularly for children with

disabilities, no home address, and living in extreme poverty.  Internal exclusion – that is having gained access but being excluded within the school – can be driven by teacher prejudices and/or by mistreatment by other learners. Typically, this results in under-performance by those who are discriminated against, and can result in life long damage through recurrent mental illness. However, as recent research on racism and white exceptionalism has shown prejudice not only disadvantages the person being discriminated against, but also the one doing the discrimination (Libers 2020). It also results in system inefficiencies as the richness that would result from full involvement of those being marginalised is lost to the school community and to society more generally.

Poor school management exacerbates the challenge faced by marginalized learners. Badly managed schools tend to create conditions where bullying and prejudice are more likely to flourish. Weak management and poor management practices tend to be more prevalent in schools which are serving the poorer and more marginalized communities where more children are at risk (Chisholm 2004). In addition, where such conditions prevail real learning is less likely to occur.

UNESCO recognises that economic crises in the developed world – as in 2009 and again in 2022 due to the war in Ukraine – along with the impact of COVID-19 and increasingly climate change have a direct impact on the financing of education and subsequently access to quality education, particularly for the most marginalised households and children in the developing world (UNESCO 2010). This report concluded that even though lip-service is paid by governments to creating equal opportunities in the national schooling system they are "systematically failing to address extreme and persistent education disadvantage that leaves large sections of society marginalized". Such marginalization is usually systemic and institutionalized based on "unequal power relations" and "sustained by political indifference" (UNESCO 2010:8). It is this that the Transforming Education Summit (TES) is particularly aimed at changing, as marginalization is determined socially, economically and politically. Marginalization of families and communities has a host of impacts on their children's access to quality education, which tends to reinforce marginalization through the generations. However, even when children from marginalized families or groups access education they often suffer from low expectations by teachers which create a self-fulfilling process.

Crises – however caused – and poverty lead to out of school youth and children who never enrol in school. It also leads to burgeoning levels of early marriage and teenage pregnancies, with the consequent failure to complete school by the affected girls. It also leads to children resorting to living on the street. Without an address or stable home environment, street children rarely get to access school at all.

If we home in on Sub-Saharan Africa, fewer than 1 in 20 poor, rural girls will complete secondary school. They are seven times less likely to finish school than non-poor, urban boys. The figures are even worse for those who are poor and disabled. Achievement gaps between the wealthiest learners and the poorest are huge and in 10 out of 25 low- and middle-income countries with data, the poorest learners are falling further behind the wealthiest learners (International Commission on Financing Global Educational Opportunity 2016). In other words, inequalities are deepening. These are exacerbated in some African countries, including South Sudan and the countries of the Sahel, by conflict and population displacement.

Even if children from poorer backgrounds access school, malnutrition often means that they struggle to engage fully in the learning process. In some communities in southern Africa this is given a particularly nasty twist, where children live on farms where payment traditionally was (and even sometimes still is) paid in alcohol, or where alcohol is subsidised by the farm. The result is children

who are born with Foetal Alcohol Syndrome (Lubbe et al. 2017) and have serious intellectual and attention deficit challenges.

It is assumed that a good, well-constructed curriculum which focuses in on social justice and equity will increase equity. But as Fiske and Ladd (2004) showed in their seminal work on the impact of the post-apartheid curriculum in South Africa, saying all the right things does not achieve equity. In fact, it can be argued that Curriculum 2005, with its outcomes-based approach and lack of detailed subject content deepened disadvantage (Taylor & Vinjevold 1999) as the very teachers who were most in need of direction and support – those in township and rural schools – were the most abandoned and confused by the new curriculum. The result was a generation of youth who were never taught basic literacy and numeracy skills.

## 3. International good practice

Well-designed school feeding schemes often provide a magnet to keep marginalized children in school and also provide nutritional advantages which allow the children to learn better. As many marginalized children are malnourished such programmes can increase school attendance and educational achievement (UNESCO 2010)

Progressive universalism where pro-poor spending is implemented and emphasis is on the levels of the system which have the greatest rate of return which is pre-primary and primary – particularly in more remote areas – where the spending also particularly helps poorer and more at risk children. However, all SSA countries spend considerably more per student in secondary and higher education than in primary: this is effectively deepening inequality while subsidising the relatively wealthy at the expense of the poor (International Commission on Financing Global Educational Opportunity 2016).

Training of teachers in anti-bias and inclusion. Training has to be practical and informed by real challenges that teachers face, rather than theoretical. However, training of school head teachers and teachers rarely changes behaviour without support in the classroom and school.

Providing schools with more funds so that access for those with physical disabilities is improved. This makes access easier but doesn't change attitudes and prejudices. One of the strongest views is that physical disability is a proxy for learning inability (Picard 2015).

There is a direct relationship between children attending school and staying in school longer and the education level of their mother. This talks to creating societal pressure to reduce early marriage in communities where this is a tradition. It also talks to allowing school girls who get pregnant to remain in school. While it is tempting to condemn school girls for getting pregnant the boys are rarely treated in the same way and by removing these girls from school the society condemns them and their children to inter-generational poverty. This is because this girls own children are also likely to leave school early, perpetuating the cycle.

School managers and teachers need to focus on creating an environment in school and the classroom where all children feel safe and secure and feel welcome. There is a close relationship between learner success and feeling secure. If a child is afraid, he or she will struggle to learn. This talks to the way children get to school – particularly girls – and are disciplined.

It has been shown that direct conditional cash transfers to families linked to their children registering and staying in school has a positive impact on learner retention. Such schemes in Latin America have achieved particular success with the poorest families (UNESCO 2010). The result is that under such

conditions parents keep their children in school longer and children are likely to achieve greater learning gains.

However, it should be clear that getting marginalized children in school and retaining them in school is only worthwhile if they are actively learning. Literacy data for learners at the end of Grade 3 in many developing countries indicate that all too often once in school little learning occurs. This is particularly the case in more rural schools, which also tend to be the schools attended by many of the poorest communities.

## 4. Current Situation in Namibia

Namibia has improved access to schooling for all children, irrespective of their background or learning challenges. In so doing Namibia has nearly achieved universal access to primary education and a year of pre-primary, with about 82% (EMIS 2019) of children who start Grade 1 transitioning to junior secondary at Grade 8. In addition, gender disparity in access to schooling at all levels has been eliminated. There has also been a large increase in numbers of learners with disabilities accessing schools.

However, this success story hides a number of concerns. The key ones are:

- The limited access to ECD, with under a third of infants accessing ECD classes
- High repetition rates e.g. 20.9% of learners repeated Grade 1 in 2019. However, since 2013 generally repetition rates have been coming down. Grade repetition is particularly high in Grades 1, 5 and 8
- High learner dropout rates with 24,691 learners dropping out of school early in 2020, of whom 50.8% were female and 49.2% male.

Grade repetition leads to overage learners, and overage learners are more likely to fail and drop out than correct age learners. The learner retention issue is also linked to poor performance in international benchmarking studies.

- High rates of learner pregnancy, with 2,320 female learners becoming pregnant in 2020
- 7.4%[1] of all learners have a disability or learning challenge. This is well below the assumed proportion in any population, which implies that many children and youth with disabilities, particularly in more remote and marginalized communities, are not accessing school at all
- Only 43.2% of the learners with disabilities or learning challenges in 2019 were female. This implies that girls with disabilities or learning challenges are particularly excluded from accessing school
- Lack of assistive and ICT devices specific to the needs of learner with particular disabilities and learning challenges
- Prevalence of corporal punishment in school and bullying and gender-based violence in and around school
- Weakness in the school feeding programme. Namibia has a national school feeding programme in place but it is patchy, often not operational all year round and it offers a limited range of meals. It helps, but does not fully compensate for poor access to nutritional food or any food in some communities.

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[1] This statistic is drawn from the 2019 EMIS. However, it is likely to be a serious over-estimate as disability is often counted twice depending on the nature of the disability and learning challenge. A good guestimate would be that only 5% of children with disabilities access school, meaning at least 50% never access school.

Physical infrastructure also impacts on access to schools and comfort of learners while in school. These relate to levels of learner performance and dropout, as schools without basic services will struggle to attract trained teachers and will be unwelcoming environments for children, particularly those with disabilities and teenage girls. Such schools also cannot house examination classes during the run up to exams, which was shown to be a key indicator of high performing rural schools in the national Positive Deviance Study (UNICEF 2016). Some salient statistics related to infrastructure are:

- 12.8% of schools lack toilets for learners
- About 11% of schools lack a water supply
- 17.5% of schools in 2019 lacked electricity, with nearly half of the schools in Kavango West having no access to electricity.

A pattern appears in the EMIS data with the same rural and relatively poor regions having the most schools without basic services and teacher housing. These same regions perform poorest in national examinations and probably have higher rates of dropout.

The challenges listed above are compounded by the limited human and financial resources available to the MoEAC and schools. Again, these resources are most stretched in the poorer regions.

Overall, the policy environment is world class. There are some improvements that need to be made to the policy environment, for instance, the National Standards and Performance Indicators document does not contain sufficient school health indicators. The key issue is not the policies but their implementation which is often weak. This may imply that the policies, which are often reflections of developed country policies, are not suitable for the Namibian environment.

In schools Life Skills is a subject and the Life Skills teacher is the main conduit through which learners can be referred for professional assistance. This teacher is also the main point of contact in the school for any health and welfare issues. However, the subject is not examined and so is not part of the subject results used to promote learners to the next grade. In addition, life skills has insufficient time allocated on the school timetable. This means that the Life Skills teacher is considered low on the staff hierarchy and there is a lack of career structure for them. This impacts on the quality of teachers who train and take up posts as Life Skills teachers. Life Skills teachers are also meant to include sexuality education in their teaching, but many communities resist such education and, even where it is taught, harmful cultural practices often counter the messages that the subject carries. These include pressure in some communities for early marriage, with consequent teenage pregnancies.

Overall, a key concern is that since the advent of 'free' education there has been insufficient community and parental engagement and involvement with schools and a sense in schools that parents are too often not taking adequate care of their children. This, inevitably, undermines the ability of schools to understand and act on health and welfare issues that the children – and especially those with disabilities and learning challenges – have in the community.

As with the situation across the world, all these challenges were compounded and exacerbated by the impact of COVID-19. This crisis impacted on children's health, particularly their mental health, saw a peak in learner pregnancies in some communities and increased the need for health and psycho-social support. This was compromised by accessibility during the pandemic and by limited trained human resources following the pandemic.

## 5. Reflections from the Regional Stakeholder Consultations

The challenges listed below were solicited from a set of 14 regional consultations. For each local leaders – school-based, traditional, religious, elected and NGO[2] – were invited, along with school learners and those in youth organisations. The process was quite formal with speeches and PowerPoint presentations by Minister/Deputy Minister and other education leaders. The group sessions were started with a PowerPoint presentation specific to that track. Then the rest of the session involved participants responding to the slides and also each other. At the start this was conducted in classrooms with COVID compliant seating which did not encourage discussion. Later consultations were increasingly held with participants around a table or in a ring. Where discussions died the track lead had a set of questions which they asked to trigger further discussion. As a result, the concerns tended to focus on specific issues and so were fairly predictable and were repeated time after time. Towards the end of the hour to an hour and a half session, the track lead would guide the participants to agree on the main concerns and priority actions they were proposing. These were then presented to the plenary.

Namibia has recognised that it has a severe learner retention issue in schools (MoEAC 2015). The report detailed 13 reasons for early drop out and exclusion. These included teenage pregnancy, living in remote rural areas, having special needs, being an orphan, being a refugee or living in 'squatter' camps or on the street, and being overage. Participants in the regional consultations repeated all of these and also added problems of affording school uniforms. The result of multiple internal and external exclusions is that about 65% of those aged 20 to 24 nationally in 2015 had failed to complete Grade 12 and only 59% had completed Grade 10 (MoEAC 2015).

### Inclusion

The focus on inclusion led to discussions about the lack of facilities for children with physical disabilities and learning challenges. This was a universal problem throughout the country. It included all aspects of physical infrastructure – a lack of ramps and other access features in schools, a lack of accessible hostels and hostel places, a lack of special schools or special schools with very limited places and skills, and a lack of Resource Schools, Learning Support Units and Resource Centres particularly in rural areas and in particular regions. These latter institutions are mainly urban based. This hinders inclusion. This situation was compounded by what happens in school and classrooms. Participants reported that most teachers and schools seem ill-prepared for such learners as teachers cannot identify learners with learning difficulties and even where they can identify them, rarely know how to teach them to cater for the challenge. The Life Skills teachers who, if they are trained, have some ability to identify and assist such children or make referrals for them to appropriate professionals, are thin on the ground, often untrained and in many schools missing entirely. Equally, professional services to support learners with specific challenges are lacking, particularly in some of the northern districts.

Interestingly there was regular concern about the plight of children of refugees who struggle to access schools due to the need to show identification papers to register. The regularly expressed concern for refugee and displaced children was noteworthy, contrasts with the xenophobia in neighbouring South Africa, and talks to Namibia as a caring society. The refugee or displaced children are from across Africa, and in some instances are from communities which straddle the border with Angola.

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[2] Not in all regional consultations – e.g. missing in Kunene.

There were many inputs related to the problems with Life Skills. As mentioned earlier, Life Skills is a subject that is taught but is not examined. As a result, it is not sufficiently taught and not taken seriously enough. In addition, the Life Skills teachers are meant to be the first point of contact for any learner who is struggling and to refer learners to professionals. This has led to these teachers being overstretched as they teach and provide support to learners who require it in the school. In addition, in some regions there are inadequate numbers of social workers for referrals. Worse, some Life Skills teachers are not trained as such. This was linked by many regions to insufficient Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights education and services. This, in turn, was linked to the prevalence of teenage pregnancies and sexual abuse.

Policies are in place, such as the Sector Policy on Inclusive Education of 2013 and the Child Care and Protection Act of 2015. But the constant complaint is that they are not being implemented or that they are implemented poorly leading to concern about their lack of impact. The policies cannot be fully evaluated as there seems to be a consistent lack of data on the access to schools and performance of learners with disabilities and learning challenges.

The reasons why many children and youth dropout of school was explored as this is a key aspect of understanding challenges of inclusion. A number of reasons were put forward for why children dropout and these were repeated with little variation between different regions. These include distance to school and lack of hostel space, drug and alcohol abuse, poor sanitation in schools and lack of access to sanitary pads, being held back to repeat a grade so becoming overage, cultural practices keeping particularly teenage boys out of school, teenage pregnancy, child labour, early marriage and lack of parent care. Many learners live with grandmothers and so lack parental engagement with schools.

Part of the problem comes down to the perceived lack of engagement between communities and their schools. For instance, girls and their parents or grandparents are often not aware of the policy which means that pregnant girls can continue in school and teachers and head teachers are not aware of how to implement this policy justly and consistently. Similarly, another often mentioned reason for girls dropping out, particularly in rural areas, is the lack of access to sanitary pads, and lack of sanitary conditions in school.

The participants also link high levels of dropout with poor implementation of the promotion policy which means that schools implement it in different ways. The end result is a large number of overage learners, who make teaching more difficult and who are already often on the first step to dropping out. In addition, many participants reported schools insisting on different conditions for enrolment. Some insist on specific documents which tends to discriminate against learners who lack such documents. This is doubly discriminatory if the school further insists on prospective learners doing tests/interviews. The participants report that children who are consistently discriminated against are those from child headed household, refugee and undocumented communities and generally the most marginalised.

Gender based violence (GBV) in schools and in the community is also cited as a reason for some girls, particularly, dropping out of school. This talks to the failure of schools to deal with such situations sensitively, and a lack of cooperation between the MoEAC and other line Ministries to fight against GBV in the communities and schools.

Another concern highlighted was that often boys, who are away from schools to engage in cultural practices, are not allowed back into school after completing the practices, which is against policy.

There are general concerns – as in many African countries – about the quality of the learning process that children and youth are exposed to once they have accessed school. This is most worrying in relation to foundational skills. Across Namibian there is a general lack of support for learners who fail to learn to read in their early years in school. This may be exacerbated by a mismatch between the use of English in ECD and the foundation phase in home language – a fact that was mentioned by participants. Learners who fail to learn to read in the early grades will feel increasingly bored and marginalised, particularly as they enter Grade 5 which is taught in English. The school conditions which encourage early dropout and which leave non-academic learners feeling that their needs are not catered for is reinforced by those in the community which reportedly often lack sports, social and cultural facilities and activities for youth. This means that youth are bored and, in some cases get involved in antisocial activities, which were detailed by the participants, then lead to a fall-off in performance in school making them vulnerable to early dropout.

A critical part of any attempt to keep children in school is increasingly about making sure that the learners get adequate nutrition. The school feeding scheme, supported by the policy, is seen as critical in keeping children in school yet the participants reported that the meals are often monotonous (porridge), not nutritious, patchily implemented and schools lack proper storage facilities and implementation processes to sustain the NSFP well. There is a regular concern that the NSFP is not extended to secondary schools. In one region, it was reported that when the NSFP is not working properly the schools close early as learners get too tired and hungry so cannot concentrate.

### School Safety

School safety issues were raised regularly in every region. In every part of the country in some communities, it was asserted that schools are unsafe for both learners and teachers due to violence, bullying, drug and alcohol abuse among learners and shebeens near schools.

In the northern regions there were concerns about wild animals and particularly elephants making walking to school potentially dangerous. This was linked to the lack of secure fencing around some schools. This was a concern across the country.

Particularly in the northern regions' rural areas the school and hostel buildings themselves may be the cause of a lack of safety as they need maintenance and are crumbling.

### Moral decay and abuse

There was a lot of focus in the consultation meetings, including the Youth Track, on what is seen as declining standards of behaviour amongst the youth. This relates to abuse of drugs and alcohol but also to bullying and general anti-social behaviour. This focus, which was often presented as societal moral decay clearly strikes a chord in Namibia. It is driven by fears that learner behaviour is deteriorating rapidly.

This was linked to falling standards of behaviour by some teachers, particularly those who learners reported as sexually abusing learners, which have led to declining respect for teachers.

### School health

A number of issues were raised in relation to schools being healthy environments in which to learn and teach. These included:

- lack of clean water
- unusable toilets or even complete lack of toilets
- lack of security fencing around the school
- lack of maintenance which can even make school and hostel buildings unsafe.

There was also some focus – particularly by teachers in the regional consultations – on overcrowded and under-resourced classrooms.

## 6. Namibian good practice

There was a regular focus in the regional consultations on the relationship between the policies – which are seen as good – and their implementation, which was often lamented. This may be because the policies are not understood and in time will be implemented effectively, or more worryingly, are not implementable under Namibian conditions.

UNICEF's study of positive deviant schools (UNICEF 2016) indicated that there are schools which are being successful while accepting all learners from the local community and understanding how poverty impacts on learning. As a result, such schools operate examination camps at school during much of the learner's last year in school and during holidays. This is based on a realisation that learners from poorer homes cannot study in a quiet, dedicated space, while girls find it hard to prepare for exams when they are expected to undertake domestic chores.

The process did not generate many positive practices, except the quality of the policies and legal processes, which on the whole seem to be in advance of practice, leading to many consultation groups stating that the laws and policies should be properly disseminated and be implemented properly and fully. Also, schooling is now free, ECD has been introduced and is being moved to the MoEAC, and the NSFP has been introduction. All are positive steps but all have come with challenges.

Life Skills teachers are in place and teach and run programmes such as that on Gender Based Violence to deal with specific concerns in schools and the wider community. However, many concerns were raised about the status and career options for LS teachers.

## 7. Proposed Transforming Levers

The key – that only a few regions mentioned – to inclusivity and safe schools is competent leaders at both school and regional levels leading to well managed schools. This should be the overall aim in every school. The literature also makes clear that this is critical for safe, learner-friendly and inclusive schools.

Given the process detailed in Section 4, not surprisingly the levers and solutions were limited and tended to reproduce similar ones to those already heard consistently – and in many cases were heard in the 2011 National Conference. There was general agreement that existing legislation is adequate to protect rights, promote inclusion, and prevent and address all forms of stigma, but it is not implemented. This is a constant concern, and reflects concerns expressed at the 2011 National Conference.

The TES Track 1 Paper states that "inclusive, transformative education must ensure that all learners have unhindered access to and participation in education, that they are safe and healthy, free from violence and discrimination, and are supported with comprehensive care services within school settings".

### Inclusion
All groups detailed the reasons that were excluding learners from school, as detailed above. The responses to these reasons for exclusion that were regularly repeated were:

- Disseminate the policy on teenage pregnancy to parents and learners. This should be complemented with educating teachers on how to address this matter
- Make sure schools understand and follow the policy on grade promotion and repetition and monitor their implementation by schools to ensure that they are implemented properly
- Make sure schools are fenced and the buildings are maintained and safe
- Procure and distribute free sanitary pads to female learners regularly (as female learners argued, why are condoms free and sanitary pads have to be purchased when we can choose to have sex, but we have no choice about being girls)
- Ensure all primary schools feed their learners every school day and provide a nutritious diet
- Ensure all schools are using the same approach to registering learners.

In more detail and specific to learners with specific learning needs the participants argued for the establishment of separate Resource Schools or resource units in existing schools to cater for learners with special needs. This should be supported by establishing community-based resource centres to provide information to both parents and children on government programmes designed to support children with disabilities. These centres can be attached to existing primary and secondary schools, Councillor offices or health facilities. There were also demands for more special needs teachers and to build more Resource Schools with hostels and identify more schools which could cater for learners with challenges. Finally, it was argued that staffing norms for schools with special education cases must be relooked at and not be treated like other classes.

Participants across the country argued that every school should have a trained and supported Life Skills teacher with a maximum of 250 learners per LS teacher. As we noted earlier, LS teachers play a much bigger role than simply teaching life skills as they are also the main link between the learners who are struggling or face challenges and the wider social/psychological support and health systems. This is particularly important when having learners living away from home in hostels and when trying to convince parents of disabled children to attend school.

Throughout the discussions it is clear that there is need for better data and research information. There appears to be a lack of basic system-level data on learners with special needs and those that live with disabilities. There is also need for tracking data on how learners with disability and learning challenges are retained by schools, how regularly they repeat grades, and what they do once they have finished school or dropout. To prevent learners being excluded unnecessarily there is a strong push for better research on why learners are absent and what the consequence of them being excluded are on their lives and aspirations. This also needs to be costed so that the waste in not providing full service facilities is set against the cost of providing them. Systems also need to be in place which can track learners who have dropped out and allow teachers to follow up and persuade these learners to return to school. But first we need to understand why they dropped out. Bringing them back to face the same conditions which forced them to drop out in the first place will achieve nothing.

Research needs to be able to feed into action. This will require stronger pro-poor and gender sensitive budget allocations, as well as funding targeted at helping schools and learners recover from the impact of COVID-19, and particularly the learning loss caused by limited access to ICT in poorer communities. Participants argued for the review of budgeting to consider regional/school contexts (urban/peri-urban and rural differences) and to assist in reducing differentiation in access to resources and ICTs.

Children cannot learn if they are hungry and getting inadequate nutrition. So, correctly, there was a belief among participants in the importance of the NSFP. However, it is not implemented effectively and does not extend to the secondary school learners. The key aim must be to get the NSFP working

effectively in the primary schools, with nutritious food served daily throughout the school year. Patchy coverage is not helpful. There was quite a lot of focus on the supplementing of the maize meal that the ministry provides with home-feeding – provision of home-grown vegetables from community gardens, which stimulates the local economy – and the development of school gardens.

Much of the proposed approach to inclusion in schools is predicated on campaigns to get more community engagement and ownership. This will have to start with a campaign to change community understanding of 'free education' which appears to have effectively disempowered communities and killed what previous agency existed. Communities need to know that they are needed to help identify out of school learners, support school fundraising activities, assist with developing school gardens to enrich the NSFP, and give the teachers moral support – as well as reporting them for misdemeanours such as public drinking and having relationships with school children. Communities also need to be involved in sensitization campaigns to encourage the registering of all children with disabilities. Finally, local administrations need to invest more in sports facilities, which help develop sporting skills, particularly for youth who are not academic.

Another key to making inclusivity a reality is in making sure that all teachers are equipped to undertake the basic functions in relation to learners with learning challenges. This is identifying them and being able to teach in a way that ensures all learners are included. This requires teacher training institutions, particularly UNAM, to ensure that all trainee teachers have completed a module or course on inclusive education which is practical enough to equip them with skills to cope with differently abled learners. UNAM, and other providers, will also need to replicate such programmes in the CPD space to ensure all practicing teachers have that skill as well.

Schools will need to manage their resources more efficiently to ensure necessary infrastructural requirements mentioned above are met and to provide learners with specific learning challenges with assistive and ICT devices with programmes that will accommodate their specific needs, such as talk back software and magnifiers. The provision of assistive devices is already being undertaken byt the MoEAC: this programme needs to be continued and, if possible, strengthened.

## School Safety

Many schools lack adequate safe physical structures and fencing. The most helpful response on this issue was in line with international practice, which is to set minimum norms and standards for schools which have to be in place. These norms and standards should immediately include secure fencing and toilets. These can be developed with community help. The norms and standards need to be supported with a regional maintenance plan for schools and provision of solar electricity and water to every school. This needs to start with a focus on the needs of rural schools.

Many responses talked to multi-agency involvement in school safety. This would include introducing and enhancing community policing to reinforce the work of the police.

## Moral decay and abuse

There was considerable focus on moral decay by both learners and the broader participants. The assumption is that schools, with community engagement, can reverse this trend. It is worth noting that there is little in the global discourse that would support this premise. However, some of the proposals would assist schools more generally. These include the capacity building of teachers especially, Life Skills teachers, the capacity building of school board members to support the implementation of policies and programmes at schools and ….

It is less likely that other solutions suggested such as increased religious instruction or biblical/koranic studies would have the desired effect.

Some of the discussion groups focused in on sexual abuse of learners by teachers. Learners particularly highlighted this problem as well as the sale of girls to older men. The responses to this were mainly policy related as the concern is well covered in policy. This includes enforcing policy/directives against sexual relationship between teachers and learners; implementing the Child Care and Protection of 2015; and introducing police clearance for everyone applying for teaching to screen out applicants with a history of sexual abuse. Many groups also recommended making sure that sex education is taught in all schools. Although not mentioned in discussions this talks to the need for a Teacher Regulatory Body, which would set the norms for teacher behaviour and would sanction and even remove teachers for breaking their code of conduct.

## School health

The many school health related concerns led to demands for:

- Providing water to all schools for use in the school nutrition programme and for washing
- Strengthening security towards safeguarding food so food is not stolen
- Constructing sanitary facilities including toilets where schools lack these

There is a belief that Life Skills teachers are key players in the school in relation to school health. However, it is acknowledged that they are only as good as the support and services which are available outside the school, which can be drawn on where needed.

A regular contribution was that communities and parents need to be mobilised in relation to school health as many of the challenges are home based.

A key proposal was for the MoEAC, working with relevant Ministries, to draw up standard specifications for school construction so that anyone who builds a school must do so to meet specific minimum standards.

## Proposed priority actions

The key actions are:

- Stronger provision for learners with disabilities including school physical access, accessible hostels, educator and professional services support
- Multi-sector collaboration to conduct public education and raise awareness on alcohol and drugs abuse
- Establishment of a Regulatory Body to set standards for teachers including making sure no one who should not be a teacher becomes one, and teachers who abuse learners are charged and, if necessary, removed
- No school should be allowed to open without key infrastructure in place, such as toilets and safe buildings. This will involve prioritising greater funding to the schools in the poorer regions and more marginalised areas
- Support community hostels as they serve a key purpose and save the MoEAC money while helping get learners into school
- Make Life Skills an examinable promotional subject and ensure every school has at least one Life Skills teacher.

Many of the proposed actions require MoEAC co-ordinating with other Ministries and other entities which can provide support to developing appropriate infrastructure, support services, professional medical and psychosocial inputs, and so on. The multi-sectoral approach needed to deal with alcohol and drug abuse, teenage pregnancy and so on, will require much more matrix management by the MoEAC and opening channels to the other entities.

Stronger research particularly into particular aspects of dropout and vulnerability in school is required. There is also a need to provide timeous data generation and management and use. This would then become the basis for much of the research and analysis that would provide the evidence to inform evidence-based transformation in the education sector.

More community engagement so that School Boards, with training, can play a more useful support role and communities can provide more support to their local school.

The areas with high rates of exclusion and low rates of retention are the same areas where learner performance in SACMEQ tests is low. SACMEQ IV saw an overall improvement in learner scores in reading and maths, but the gap between the average performance of learners in rural and urban schools remained (in maths 505 compared to 551; in reading 511 versus 581) (MoEAC 2015; Shigwedha et al. 2017). This large difference within a country is associated with unequal access to quality schooling. The difference in performance between rural and urban learners is seen across most African countries, but the difference between them in Namibia is extreme by international standards. This talks to the need for a strong literacy and numeracy intervention in rural regions and lower performing schools. It also talks to the need to improve the impact of the regional education offices so that they are able to better support struggling schools.

## 8. Conclusions

Making every learner in a school feel that they are welcome and can succeed in a school is a challenge for most schools. Those schools that have the lowest levels of abuse and are the safest and most inclusive are generally going to be those that are well managed and are supported by the local community. Also, although not mentioned much in the inputs, the Regional Education Office plays a critical role in helping schools manage inclusion and minimise issues of abuse and poor safety. A well-structured REO that can support schools on a regular basis and is amenable to the head teachers and Life Skill teachers, and can provide advice on referrals and psychosocial support is critical to effective delivery of this track.

This needs to be supplemented with the MoEAC, working with other ministries, ensuring that all schools have basic infrastructure and access to services so that every school can offer a safe, sanitary, learner- and disability-friendly and gender sensitive environment.

Many of the concerns about learners dropping out early due to being overage and failing exams relate to the failure of such learners to gain basic literacy and numeracy skills in the early grades. Early grade literacy skills are critical to keeping learners in school and closing the equity gap between rural and urban schools and between more rural and more urban regions. Making sure that early grade literacy interventions and other learning improvements are effective is dependent on having well-trained and supported teachers. Teachers are key to creating effective and inclusive school environments.

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