An education for EVERY CHILD

SAMANTHA WHITAKER INVESTIGATES THE WORK BEING DONE IN NAMIBIA TO OVERCOME OBSTACLES TO UNIVERSAL FREE SCHOOLING

As part of a vigorous reform to give every Namibian child the chance to go to school, the Ministry of Education established a taskforce in 1995 specifically to target children living in remote areas. The idea was to provide them not only with an education, but also with food, clothing and basic healthcare.

"That's where ROSL came in and very timely indeed," explains Clara Bohitile, who was Deputy Minister of Basic Education and Culture at the time. "The ROSL-Namibia project focused on the children of the Himba, the San and the farm workers, for whom the doors of learning were previously shut." Over the last 20 years, the project has helped hundreds of Namibian children, with some of those students returning to their schools as qualified teachers.

At the same time, the Government of the Republic of Namibia (GRN) has maintained an impeccable record of allocating the largest share of its national budget to the education sector – 18% in 2015/16 – while the introduction of free pre-school and primary education in 2013 has increased learner enrolment by 3% each year. Now a high number of Namibian children attend primary school, the learner/textbook ratio at primary level is 1:1 for core subjects in most schools, and the government says it is close to achieving its target of full literacy among the country's youth.

However, according to a report by Namibia's Minister of Education, Arts and Culture, Hon Katrina Hanse-Himarwa, since the introduction of free schooling, 75% of the education budget has been absorbed by teachers' salaries, leaving very little for much-needed classrooms, renovations and learning materials. As a result, the ministry is working hard to iron out inefficiencies and ensure that teachers use the most effective teaching and learning methods.

Since 2005, there has been a strong emphasis on pre-school education, which, according to ministry research, can improve children's health, emotional, cognitive and social outcomes, and help to reduce the number of children repeating grades, dropping out of school or being placed in special education.

Jacky Konjore, Principal of Help the Helpless Kindergarten in Tsumeb, agrees that compulsory pre-school education is hugely beneficial. "When it was introduced, as a teacher, I could see and feel the difference in my classroom," she says. "It gives children a certain confidence when they move into primary school, which is particularly important for rural children as they can find it challenging to enter a school environment for the first time and mix with children from urban areas."



CHILDREN MAY HAVE TO WALK 5KM OR MORE JUST TO GET TO SCHOOL. BY THE TIME THEY ARRIVE, THEY ARE EXHAUSTED. 'LET THEM SLEEP LATER' HAS BECOME THE MOTTO



Above: Roddy Porter with pupils at Xatoba Primary School
Below: A lesson at Mondesa Youth Opportunity

However, despite the budget allocation for the pre-primary education programme, it seems that funds are not yet reaching all of Namibia's schools. Zirk Vermeulen is Principal of Hippo Primary School in Omaheke, one of three schools that continues to receive support from the ROSL-Namibia project. "For me, it seems that the means to implement some policies are not fully planned," he says. "For example, to introduce pre-primary, I have to provide a classroom, housing for a teacher and hostel facilities for 30-40 boarders. Universal Primary Education (UPE) money cannot cater for such needs." The will is clearly there, though the means may lag behind.

A lack of resources

The ministry is also keen to boost the quality of Namibia's teachers. Although SAT scores (the national tests for primary-school children) are improving year by year, it has been suggested that poor results point to insufficient teacher training and a lack of knowledge of effective methods. These shortcomings are being addressed with a programme of training workshops on a range of subjects, from washing hands to road safety.



VISION 2030

The government launched its development agenda in 2004.

It aims to "transform Namibia into a healthy and food-secure nation".

High standards of living and quality education are among the key aspirations.

However, this can have the knock-on effect of leaving children without a teacher for up to three days, according to Zirk. "There's absolutely nothing wrong with training, but most schools in rural areas cannot provide a relief teacher, so learning does not take place," he explains. Schools are now able to appoint non-qualified teachers, which has helped to ease the burden, but this comes with its own challenges says Jacky, who is sometimes forced to employ grade 12 students as teachers.

In a country with 28 languages, another issue facing primary schools is what languages to use in the classroom. The ministry encourages schools to use the native languages of their children in grades 1-3, and then to switch to English. But at Hippo Primary, Zirk struggled to find teachers to cover the six languages represented at the school and, after two years of searching, he decided to implement English as the first language. The school's results have since improved considerably. "I understand that mother tongue is by far the best tool for any learner to master concepts, but conditions in this country can make this impossible to implement," he says.

Most schools also suffer from an ongoing shortage of classroom equipment. More government money is spent on feeding school children than on learning resources, and if there is a drought the Ministry of Education is required to provide even more assistance, without a budget increase.

In addition, many rural areas have insufficient internet and mobile connectivity, schools suffer from a lack of parental involvement, while children may have to walk 5km or more just to get to school. "By the time they arrive, they are exhausted," says Jacky. "'Let them sleep later' has become the motto."

Despite these challenges, both Zirk and Jacky recognise that the ministry, with assistance from NGOs and stakeholders, is doing its best to meet demands. Continued investment in education is one of the cornerstones to achieving Vision 2030, Namibia's long-term goal of improving the lives of its people and moving the nation significantly up the scale of human development. Its children of today are its human resources of tomorrow: a healthy, skilled workforce that it is hoped will help transform Namibia into a strong, sustainable, knowledge-based economy.

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