



# Namibia

The impact of language policy  
and practice on children's learning:  
Evidence from Eastern and Southern Africa  
2017

## 2.12 Namibia

### 2.12.1 Background information

Namibia was colonized by Germany from 1884 until 1915, when South Africa took over administration of the colony and remained in control until 1988. Brock-Utne and Hopson (2005, p. 99) note that “[d]espite the less than 5 per cent of the population (by conservative estimates) of nearly 1.5 million people for whom English was the first language at the time of independence, English was still chosen as the official language of independent Namibia, and mother tongues were designated as media of education and instruction at the lower primary level.” Brock-Utne and Hopson argue that the goal of the policy was to replace the colonial language, Afrikaans, with English as the “the language of liberation”. The teaching of English was made a priority throughout the 1990s (2005, p. 104).

Ethnologue lists 30 languages for Namibia.

### 2.12.2. Current language policy

The current language policy from 2003 closely follows the policy of 1992; mother tongue instruction is compulsory in primary grades up to Grade 3, after which English becomes the medium of instruction. The mother tongue is taught as a subject from Grade 4. Töttemeyer notes that efforts to allow mother tongue-medium instruction beyond Grade 3 have failed: “During the drafting of the National Curriculum for Basic Education in 2008, the National Institute for Educational Development (NIED) again tried to convince the Ministry to extend mother tongue instruction up to Grade 7 but without success” (Töttemeyer, 2010, p.14).

### 2.12.3. Education policy and practice

The 2003 language policy (Ministry of Basic Education, Sports and Culture, 2003, p.4) states that the language of instruction in Grades 1 to 3 should be the predominant local language. It further states that “if parents or the school wish to use English as the medium of instruction in the Lower Primary phase, permission must be obtained from the Minister of Basic Education, Sport and Culture with well-grounded, convincing motivation.” As of 2008, 243 schools in Namibia had received ministerial approval to do this (Töttemeyer, 2010, p.55).

Transition to English as the language of instruction is to occur in Grade 4, while the mother tongue is taught as a subject throughout primary and secondary school years. National examinations, except for the mother tongue subject exam, are in English.

Ten Namibian languages plus English, German and Afrikaans qualify as languages of instruction in the early primary grades. The language policy also notes that “in a school where there are a substantial number of learners (20 or more) from different language groups, the school must make arrangements to provide instruction in the different languages” (Ministry of Basic Education, Sports and Culture, 2003, p. 5).

The prominent role of English in upper primary and secondary classrooms is contested, however, on the grounds that the children do not speak it well enough. Frydman (2011) argues that “the implementation of indigenous languages as media of instruction for Namibian schools would bring an overwhelmingly positive change for education in Namibia” (p. 186). Likando and Wolhuter (2013: 161), discussing the “formidable challenges” that face the Namibian education system, mention “the problem of the language of learning and teaching not being the same as the first language of the teachers and learners alike.”

Töttemeyer also expresses strong criticism of the way English has been used as a medium of instruction in ways that flout the 2003 policy.

“Some principals still believe that they have the right to decide which African/ indigenous/local languages shall be taught or not taught in their schools, or even to decide that no African language shall be taught. This assumed freedom to discriminate against some or all African languages, even when they are being spoken in the immediate vicinity, is not stipulated anywhere” (Töttemeyer, 2010, p. 10).

In December 2014, the Namibia Institute of Public Administration and Management and the University of Namibia launched the Indigenous Language Initiative.<sup>1</sup> The initiative is described as “a platform for the recognition of community language varieties”, and it includes the development of a multilingual Namibian dictionary and translation helps.

In 2015 and 2016, an extensive review of the Education Bill of 2001 was carried out with financial and technical support from UNICEF and the European Union. The review process included both national and regional consultations.<sup>2</sup>

The result of this reform work was a new Education Bill, finalized in late 2016. The Education Bill refers to the right of a learner to be taught in the language of his or her choice where possible, and empowers local school boards to determine the best language of instruction in their locations. Batibo (2014, p.19) notes that 16 out of 26 languages in the country have been adequately documented and have teaching and learning materials for use in primary school.

#### 2.12.4. Studies

Harris (2011) carried out a study of the role of language choice in the various educational challenges in Namibia. The study was sponsored by a national NGO, Urban Trust Namibia. The research used qualitative methods among education stakeholders to discover links between attitudes towards the home language and student learning outcomes. The research indicated that a high proportion of learners are confused by the second language (English) in which they are taught. They want to succeed at school generally, and in English in particular, but the problems of language hinder their ability to understand their subjects well enough (p.7). Harris also notes that “educationalists are divided as to the correctness of the language policy, with those in the regions seeing the language policy as failing learners.”

#### 2.12.5. Language education initiatives

##### Readathons

Each year, the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture and the Association of Diplomatic Spouses and other stakeholders run a Readathon in September, in order to promote reading throughout the country. Reading in all Namibian languages is promoted, and schools are encouraged to have learners read in their local languages where materials are available.

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1. <http://allafrica.com/stories/201412050838.html>. Accessed 11 March, 2016.

2. [https://www.moe.gov.na/files/downloads/954\\_MoEAC%20-%20Towards%20a%20New%20Education%20Act%20-%20Survey%20Report%20\(February%202016\)%20-%20Final%20\(web%20quality\)%20\(2\).pdf](https://www.moe.gov.na/files/downloads/954_MoEAC%20-%20Towards%20a%20New%20Education%20Act%20-%20Survey%20Report%20(February%202016)%20-%20Final%20(web%20quality)%20(2).pdf)

3. <http://www.osisa.org/law/namibia/urban-trust-namibia>. Accessed a11 March, 2016.



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