

Editorial

Basic Education and Skills Acquisition in Namibia

Nnenesi Kgabi, Polytechnic of Namibia

Background

As much as the Namibian Government had been committed to improve access to and quality of basic education, and despite all previous efforts and above mentioned successes, the education system is still showing serious weaknesses regarding coverage and provision, and in particular with respect to the quality of education. The quality of teaching and the performance of learners is still unsatisfactory, especially in urban and rural poverty areas [1]. The importance of laying a solid foundation in education so as to ensure acquisition of relevant knowledge and skills, progression, and completion; is confirmed by the fact that 20% of employees in Namibia have no relevant education for the profession they are working in [2]. Whilst trying hard to achieve the Millennium Development Goal of more than 99% enrollment for primary school and a literacy rate of almost 100% among the population between the age of 15 and 25; the question posed by Fischer (n.d) [2], i.e. why has the independent Namibia not managed to overcome weaknesses of the low educational standard and the lack of skilled workers, which is of course a legacy of colonial times, remains unanswered. Figure 1 shows the gross and net primary and secondary school enrollment percentages (based on World Bank data) in Namibia [3].

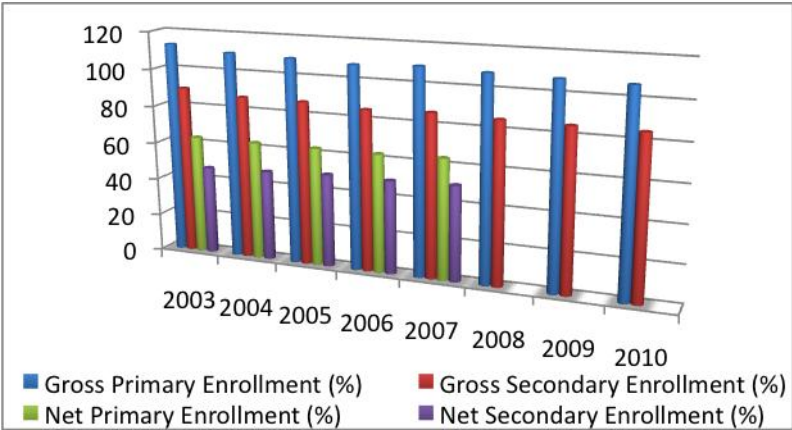


Figure 1: Gross and net enrollment percentages for primary/secondary schools

The low secondary enrolment shown in Figure 1 and the number of children getting out of primary school (Figure 2) confirms poor progression at the most basic/foundation level. This creates problems with secondary school progression and also affects the completion rates. According to IDASA [4], school dropout and repetition rates are high, and they are another cause for concern in Namibia.

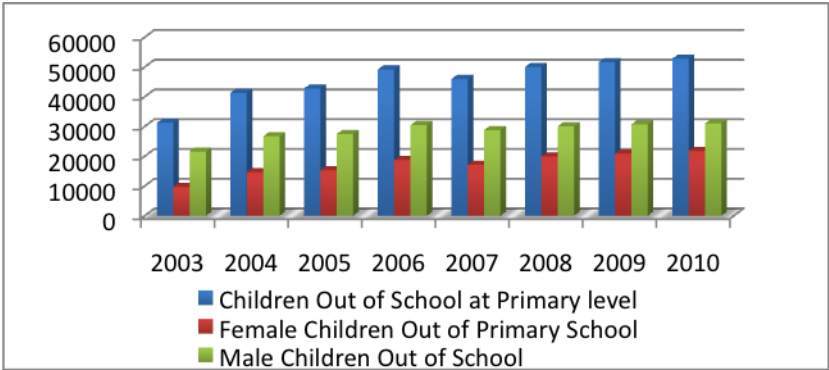


Figure 2: Number of children out of primary school

Figure 3 shows that the primary school completion rate has always been lower than the progression to secondary school. The reasons for failure to complete schooling as reported by Republic of Namibia [5] are mainly pregnancy, demands from parents, distance to school, poverty and hunger. Apart from this, as a result of HIV/Aids, approximately 121 000 orphans are enrolled in school, accounting for 21.2% of the total number of learners [5].

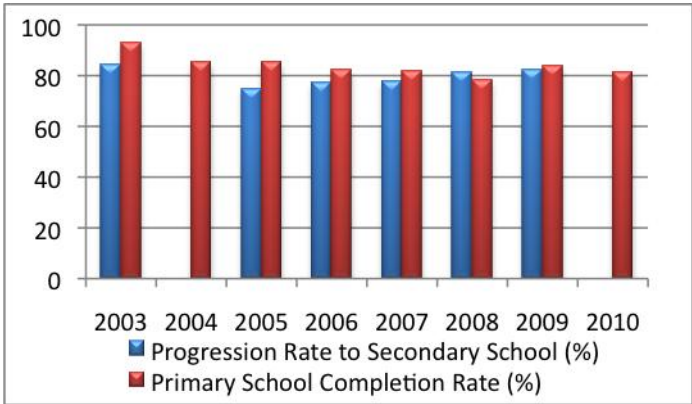


Figure 3: Completion of primary school and progression to secondary school

In an attempt to answer the questions raised, the attention of researchers and policy makers needs to be directed to possible factors affecting the quantity (access) and quality of education, namely location and distribution of schools resources (and facilities), the main focus (competencies and skills) of primary and secondary education, funding, sustainability of improvement initiatives, and quality control.

Access to Learning Resources/Facilities

Constitution of the Republic of Namibia states in Article 20 (1) that all persons shall have the right to education. The Government Policy on Education strives to provide primary, secondary and tertiary education; and adult literacy and self-development skills [6]. It is however worth noting that Namibian schools facilities differ widely from region to region, with rural schools in general being less equipped. This may be due to the fact that there are more employment opportunities in urban areas, with schools being more likely to raise the deficit required to buy school books through the school development fund [4].

Rural learners are also faced with the lack of proximity to schools and the resultant higher transport costs.

While about 78% of schools have toilet facilities, 81% have access to water and 56% to electricity, the availability of equipment and basic goods and services, or lack thereof, affects the quality of education [4]. The fact that majority of well educated and ambitious teachers want to work in urban areas, makes the quality problem even more concerning in rural areas [2].

Speaker of the Children's Parliament stated during the 2011 National Education Conference that: "Namibian children are confronted with various challenges in almost every sphere of our existence" (*The Namibian*) [7]. He also pointed out the challenges Namibian children face, ranging from unqualified teachers, lack of textbooks, school's proximity to shebeens and low standards in the education system [4].

Funding

Namibia ranks among the top ten countries in the world in terms of the percentage of funds spent on education, but among rank 120 in terms of the average outcome of well educated students [2]. Funding for education has always been priority for the Republic as shown in Figure 4.

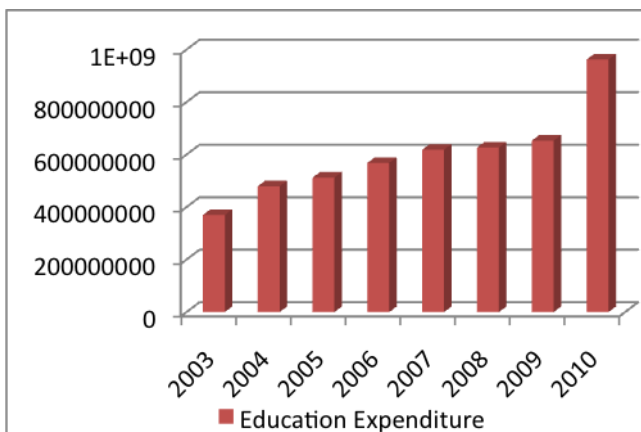


Figure 4: Annual Expenditure for Education

Even though the constitution forbids fees for primary schooling, school is not without cost in Namibia. Learners have to pay for school uniforms, school feeding, learning materials and other incidentals. The amount of these indirect school fees differ between the schools, but the poor usually struggle to even afford the cheapest ones [2].

The primary and secondary school funding issue seem to create a “crack on the wall” into which most Namibian children disappear while trying to scale up. This prevents them from completing some primary and most secondary schooling, thus adding to either the unemployment statistics or to the unskilled labor.

Initiatives to Improve

Initiatives to improve the education standard in Namibia have always been evident. The government of Namibia has the National Education Act, the Vocational Training Amendment Act and Higher Education Policy titled ‘Investing in People’ which are responsible for the establishment of training and educational awareness campaigns and projects [6].

Several projects like the National Literacy Programme aiming to educate the previously educationally disadvantaged adults in Namibia; and the Adult Skills Development or Self-Development Programme identifying small business entrepreneurs and providing support training in basic management skills; have been implemented.

The Mathematics and Science Teachers Education Programme (MASTEP) improves the capacity of mathematics and science teachers. The Namibian College of Open Learning (NAMCOL) was established as a separate entity in terms of its own Act in 1998, with the aim of addressing the development of adult learning in Namibia [6].

One of the current/ongoing initiatives is the Education and Training Sector Improvement Programme (ETSIP), a reform program to the educational sector established in 2006 to eradicate the weaknesses of the sector until 2020. Some of the main measures, which all aim at better quality and efficiency, are taken for enforcement of early childhood development and pre-primary education; quality improvement of general school education; massive expansion of vocational education and training; quantity and quality improvement of tertiary education and training; introduction of post-school adult and lifelong learning; increasing pro-poor access to education; and for increasing general knowledge and innovation. In all of these fields, human resources management (including teacher education), standardization measures (clear definitions of competences learners should acquire), monitoring of results and usage of modern technologies are central points of ETSIP [2].

Quality Control/Assurance

Namibia is a member of the Southern African Consortium on Monitoring of Educational Quality (SACMEQ). The country is signatory to the Convention on the World Declaration on Education for All and the Salamanca Framework for Action-Special Needs Education. Namibia is party to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child [6]. With this profile, discussions should be way beyond poor quality education in the country.

According to Basic Education Namibia Programme [1], at the end of grade 6 only 25% of the Namibian learners have acquired sufficient competencies in the learning areas of English and Mathematics. Only 40% of all learners pass grade 7 without repeating a year. On average 13 school years are needed to pass the final examinations for grade 10. Almost 40% of the teachers do not have senior secondary school leaving examinations, and 28% of those teach without formal pedagogical qualifications [1]. This suggests the need to assess exit level-to-skills/competencies matching within the system.

With just over 1500 schools in the country, of which about 100 are private, and mainly farm schools (Figure 5); coordination, monitoring and addressing

the possible hiccups in the system should not be a complicated matter.

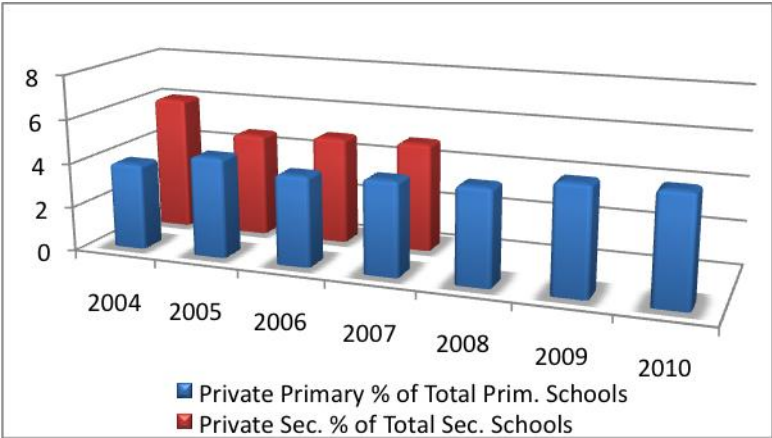


Figure 5: Percentage of private to public primary and secondary schools

Language remains a very crucial issue in Namibian schools. On the one hand, learners often struggle to switch to English after the 4th grade and their overall performance suffer from these difficulties. On the other hand, many teachers don't even enforce the turn to English due to their own challenges of poor language skills [2]. Irrespective of the situation, final assessments have to be taken in English and learners not accustomed to the language fail or perform below the average. Ideally, the language problems for learners should be reduced by better teaching.

The teachers' skills and knowledge play an important role in schools and universities, not just in terms of language, but in acquisition of other critical skills and competencies like mathematics, science and technology. It has been reported that the whole system suffers from lack of qualified teachers [2].

The EMIS Division, Ministry of Basic Education and Culture, Namibia and the World Bank however, seem to point out improvement on primary school teachers' qualifications from the 1990s (12 – 25%) to the 2000s (90 – 96.4%) [3]. The learner-teacher ratios in Figure 6 also rule out the 'pressure of work overloads' on the part of primary and secondary school teachers.

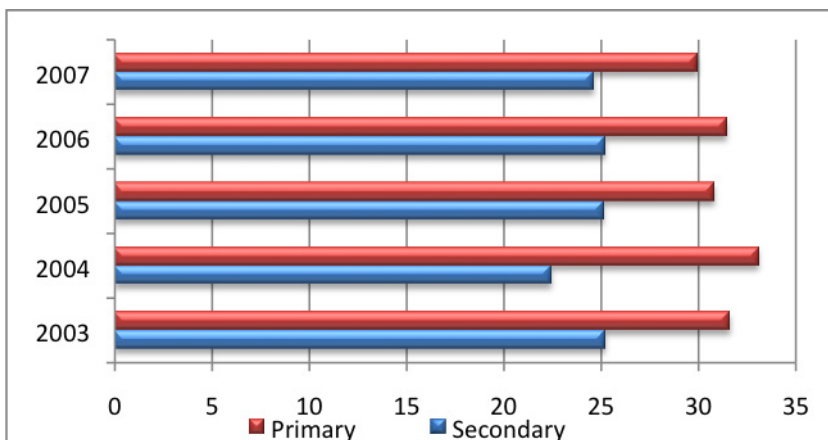


Figure 6: Primary and Secondary School Learner-Teacher Ratios

It seems that the problem is not with acquisition of qualifications, but the skills appropriate to the qualification level. There is also a possibility that in an attempt to improve teacher qualifications, the gaps created by the legacy of the past system (poor quality education) are not 'closed'. While capacity building for teacher's training is done through National Institute for Educational Development (NIED) and teachers are trained at Teachers Education Colleges; and training is offered to university students on teaching methods in order to improve the quality of education in Namibia [6]; it may be necessary to re-visit teacher training and capacity building for the whole country.

Concluding Remarks

Some of the major gaps in the Namibian education system, and that affect the quality of basic education have been identified. These include quality control, distribution of resources, language barriers, teacher capacity building and training, acquisition of skills and competencies, and sustainability of improvement initiatives. The following recommendations seem essential in an attempt to improve the quality of education in Namibia: (1) Assess the efficiency and effectiveness of the current quality control measures; (2) Review the focus of Namibian education system in order to transfer relevant skills at the right time to the Namibian child; (3) Conduct skills mapping of the school curriculum, particularly at the primary and secondary school exit points; (4) Teacher training and in-service capacity building systems need to be reviewed and aligned with the country's skills and competencies

gap; (5) The timing and approach for introduction of English as a medium of instruction should be revisited; (6) Implement ETSIP recommendations/suggestions for improvement to the system; (7) Address the distribution of resources from region to region (and urban-rural); and (8) Improve the Research-Policy interface by taking well informed decisions, and not just importation of models that may not necessarily work in the Namibian context.

References

- [1] Basic Education Namibia Programme, 2012, <http://www.nied.edu.na/Bep/>, accessed on 28 December 2012
- [2] Fischer G, The Namibian Educational System, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Windhoek, <http://fesnam.org>, accessed on 4 December 2012
- [3] World Bank, 2012, <http://www.worldbank.org/data/>, accessed on 4 December 2012
- [4] Sims B, Koep M (Eds), Unfinished Business: Democracy in Namibia: Democracy Index for Namibia, IDASA, 2012
- [5] Republic of Namibia, 2008, Namibia Millennium Development Goals, 2nd Report, Windhoek: The Government of Namibia.
- [6] Republic of Namibia, 2002, Namibia Country Profile, United Nations, Johannesburg Summit 2002
- [7] The Namibian, 2011, 'Iyambo gets it from babe's mouth'. 29 June 2011.

