

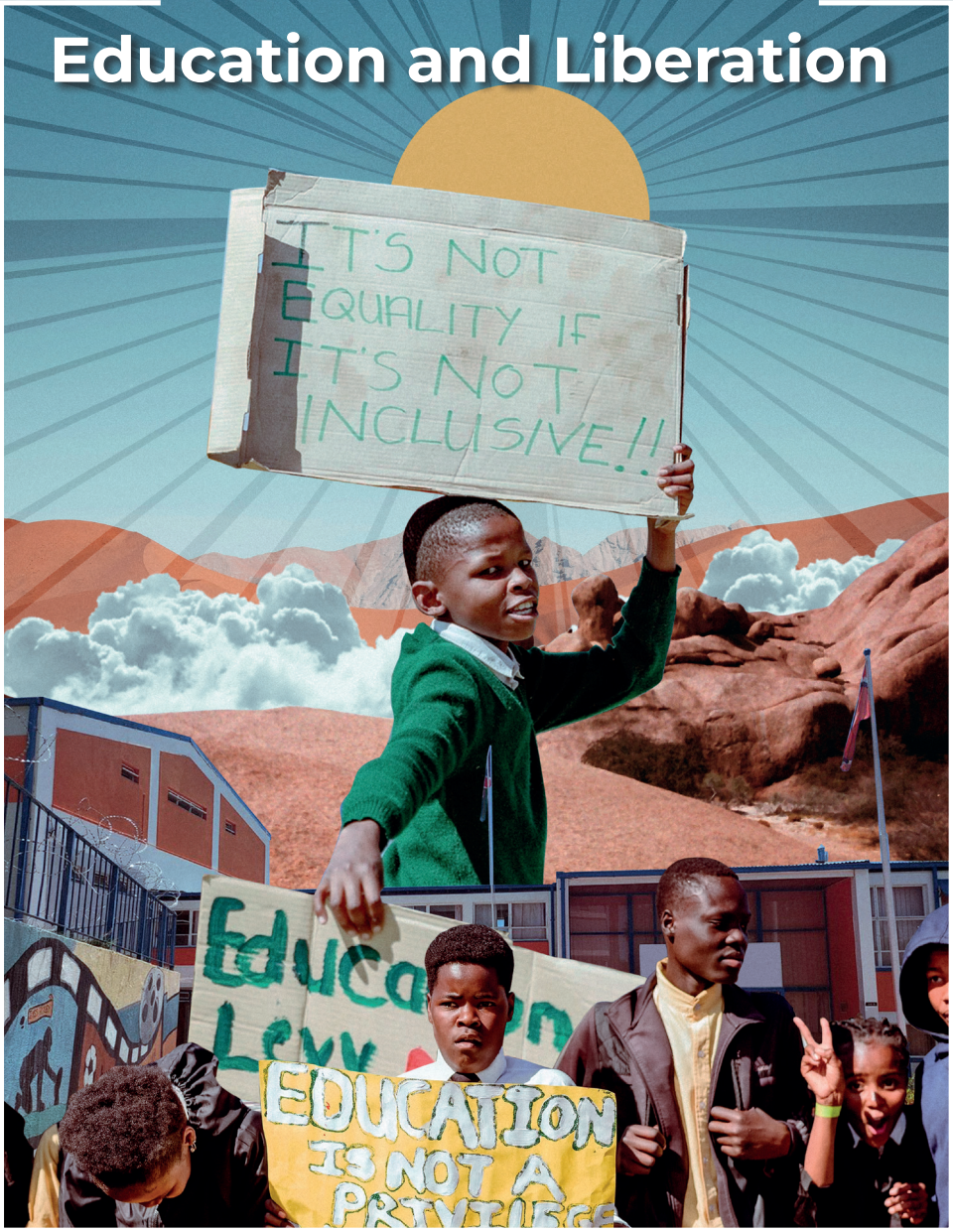
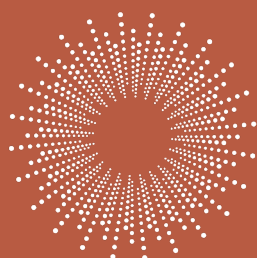


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Education for All? Unpacking Social Justice and Grassroots Policy Implementation: A Case Study of the Otjituuo Settlement

Tjipura Tjipura

Introduction

Namibia's post-independence educational landscape is defined by the aspirational brief, *Toward Education for All: A Development Brief for Education, Culture and Training* (Ministry of Education and Culture [MEC], 1993), and later formalised by the Basic Education Act (3 of 2020), which mandates free and compulsory basic education to ensure equitable, inclusive, and quality lifelong learning (Government of the Republic of Namibia [GRN], 2020). This national commitment aligns

with the philosophy of “education for liberation,” a progressive approach advocating for democratic participation and social transformation through the praxis of critical consciousness (Freire, 1972). However, as noted in recent scholarship, a persistent “gap between policy and practice” remains, particularly in rural and low-income settlements (Haingura, 2024).

This case study explores this disconnect by examining the lived realities at Otjituuo Primary School. While



Source: Tjipura Tjipura

national frameworks like Vision 2030 aim for a “knowledge-based society” with equal access for all ethnic groups (GRN, 2004), the grassroots implementation in Otjituuu reveals deep-seated systemic barriers that challenge the essence of social justice.

Key issues highlighted in the case study

- *Pedagogical silencing and academic hierarchy:* Field observations in Grade 4 reveal a classroom dynamic where academic performance dictates a learner’s right to participate. By informing lower-performing students that they “do not have the right to speak”, the educational process reinforces social stratification rather than the democratic liberation envisioned by Freire (1972) and Nyerere (1975).
- *Systemic resource depletion:* Despite the Basic Education Act’s promise of “reasonable facilities”, the school suffers from severe textbook shortages (specifically in English (18 books for 29 learners) and a total absence of materials for ICT and Arts), and deteriorating infrastructure, with over half of furniture requiring replacement (Tjipura, personal

communication (field notes), 2025).

- *Cultural erasure and linguistic marginalisation:* Although the Otjituuu settlement is home to a diverse population, including a significant San community (Ju|’hoansi speakers), the curriculum remains centered on Ovaherero culture (Orutjindu). The lack of indigenous language instruction for San learners represents a form of colonial erasure that contradicts the principles of “pedagogical justice” and cultural recognition (Banerjee & Mondal, 2026).
- *The nutrition-learning nexus:* The failure of the School Feeding Programme (*olombo*) to provide palatable or nutritious meals, resulting in students skipping meals despite 80% arriving at school without having had breakfast, highlights a critical failure in addressing the socioeconomic vulnerabilities of marginalised learners (Tjipura, 2025).

By documenting these grassroots experiences, this case study seeks to illustrate how the social forces of poverty, cultural neglect, and top-down bureaucratic inefficiencies impede the liberatory potential of education in Namibia’s rural settlements.

Background

The historical trajectory of education in Namibia is marked by a transition from a colonial system of segregation to a post-independence framework rooted in social justice and national reconciliation. Under the apartheid administration, education was used as a tool for subjugation, characterised by the “Bantu education” model which intentionally under-resourced schools for Black and marginalised communities (Amukugo, 2013). Since 1990, the Namibian government has sought to reverse this legacy, positioning education as a “tool for liberation” that empowers citizens to participate in a democratic society (Sanga, 2017).

The policy framework: A mandate for inclusion

The primary legal instrument governing this phenomenon is the Basic Education Act (2020, p.1), which mandates that the state provide “free and compulsory basic education” and ensure “equitable inclusive quality education” (Basic Education Act, 2020, p. 1). This is supported by the *Sector policy on inclusive education* (GRN, 2013), which explicitly aims to provide access to education for “educationally marginalized children”, including the San community and those living in extreme poverty (Hadula, 2024). These policies are intended to align with *Vision 2030*, which envisions a high-quality

education system that produces a skilled workforce and fosters social cohesion across all ethnic lines (GRN, 2004).

The concept of education for liberation

Central to this case study is the philosophy of education for liberation, largely influenced by the works of Julius Nyerere and Paulo Freire. As Sanga (2017, p.1) argues, education should not merely be about the acquisition of literacy, but about the “effective transformation that leads to the growth of society”. In the Namibian context, this means moving beyond “mere access” to “pedagogical justice,” where learners are treated as active participants in their own development rather than passive recipients of information (Banerjee & Mondal, 2026).

The local context: Otjituuo settlement

Otjituuo, located in the Okakarara Constituency of Otjozondjupa Region, serves as a critical site for examining the implementation of these high-level policies. The settlement is characterised by a “dual reality”: while it falls under the national mandate of Universal Primary Education, its geographical and socioeconomic isolation places it within the “education gap” identified by Haingura (2024). The community is home to a significant population of

the Jul'hoansi people, a San group who have been historically marginalised, and continue to be so in the post-independence era. Research indicates that rural settlements like Otjituuo often face “cultural and attitudinal barriers”, where the dominant language and curriculum may inadvertently erase the indigenous identities of minority groups (Hadula, 2024). The school serves as a microcosm of the settlement's challenges, where the pressures of poverty, migratory farm work, and the “neoliberal” constraints of school funding create a friction between national ideals and grassroots survival (Tjipura, 2025; Haingura, 2024).

Challenges

The implementation of “education for all” in the Otjituuo Settlement is hindered by a complex interplay of systemic, cultural, and socioeconomic barriers that exacerbate how rural schools often remain on the periphery of national development.

Pedagogical injustice and the silencing of learners

A critical challenge observed in the classroom is the emergence of an academic hierarchy that undermines the democratic principles of education for liberation. In Grade 4, it was observed that the teacher explicitly restricted the participation of lower-performing students, stating they “do

not have the right to speak” (Tjipura, 2025). This practice creates a culture of silencing that contradicts Freire's (1972) assertion that education should be a dialogue between equals. When academic performance is used as a gatekeeper for expression, the school ceases to be a tool for liberation and instead becomes a site for the “reproduction of social inequality” (Banerjee & Mondal, 2026).

Severe resource scarcity and infrastructure decay

While the Basic Education Act mandates the provision of reasonable facilities, Otjituuo Primary School faces a dire shortage of essential learning materials. The 2025 School Survey data from Grade 4B reveal:

- *Textbook deficits:* Core subjects such as English Second Language have only 18 textbooks for 29 learners, while non-promotional but essential subjects like ICT, Arts, and Life Skills have zero textbooks (Tjipura, 2025).
- *Infrastructure collapse:* The physical environment is equally strained, with 18 out of 33 chairs and 10 out of 18 double desks in Grade 4B currently in need of replacement (Tjipura, 2025). As Haingura (2024) notes, such resource constraints in

low-income rural communities significantly “bridge the gap” in the wrong direction, ensuring that rural learners remain at a competitive disadvantage compared to their urban counterparts.

Cultural erasure and linguistic barriers for the San community

The Otjituuo settlement serves a diverse student body, yet the curriculum and medium of instruction reflect a monocultural approach. Despite the presence of Jul’hoansi, Rukwangali, and Oshindonga speakers, the school utilises Otjiherero as the primary local language (Tjipura, 2025). San parents specifically reported that the lack of Jul’hoansi language instruction is a major deterrent to engagement. This “colonial erasure” of indigenous knowledge systems prevents education from being a truly liberating experience for marginalised minorities, as it fails to provide the “cultural recognition” necessary for substantive social justice (Hadula, 2024; Banerjee & Mondal, 2026).

Socioeconomic vulnerability and nutritional insecurity

The “lived reality” of the learners is defined by extreme poverty, which directly impacts their physical readiness to learn.

- *The feeding program failure:* Although a school feeding programme exists, learners reported skipping the *olombo* (porridge, or “pap”) because it was unpalatable or caused gastrointestinal distress (“running stomach”).
- *Domestic deprivation:* Four out of five interviewed learners reported going to school without breakfast, and many face “food-less nights” depending on their parents’ casual labour employment (Tjipura, 2025).
- *Migratory patterns:* Teachers reported that student retention is highly unstable, often dropping by 25–50% during the year as families migrate for farm work (Tjipura, 2025). This aligns with Haingura’s (2024) findings that economic instability in informal and rural settlements is a primary driver of school dropouts.

Actions

To navigate the “disconnect between policy formulation and on-the-ground realities”, local actors have implemented the following strategies:

Adaptive pedagogical strategies

- *Teachers’ resourcefulness:* In response to the total absence of textbooks for subjects like ICT,

Arts, and Life Skills, teachers have resorted to creating their own instructional materials. This includes using “imaginary diameters” and practical classroom examples to teach complex concepts when physical tools are unavailable.

- *Supplementary materials:* Educators frequently provide printed handouts for learners to paste into their notebooks, ensuring some level of continuity in a curriculum that was “rolled out without relevant materials”.

School administration and governance

- *Data-driven advocacy:* The school administration conducts regular surveys to document the exact condition of furniture and learner demographics, providing a factual basis for requests for regional intervention.
- *Cultural and extra-curricular integration:* To foster a sense of belonging for marginalised groups, the school maintains cultural groups for various traditions, including the Jul’hoansi and Kavango communities. These activities allow learners to “express themselves using their unique cultures”.

- *Career and motivational support:* The school invites influential community figures for “motivational speech days” and provides career guidance through the Life Skills teacher to help learners visualise opportunities beyond their current socioeconomic status.

Parental and community agency

- *Supplementing the feeding program:* Recognising that the state-provided *olombo* (porridge) is often rejected by children due to its taste or health effects, some parents provide small stipends (e.g., N\$5) for “fatcakes” (“*vetkoek*”) to ensure that their children do not learn on an empty stomach.
- *Strategic enrolment:* Many parents and students actively seek placement in the school hostel, viewing it as a safer environment with guaranteed access to water, electricity, and basic meals away from the “instability” of domestic settings.
- *Negotiating barriers:* Despite deep poverty, where many households survive on a single elder’s pension, parents continue to engage with the school to negotiate voluntary

contributions and discount schemes specifically aimed at Jul'hoansi learners.

Government-led reform efforts

At a national level, the government has implemented Universal Primary Education and rolled out new curricula intended to be more “flexible and high quality”. However, as local practitioners note, these are often “rushed”, with teachers not receiving the necessary training and material support for rural implementation.

Outcomes/Results

The outcomes of the localised actions taken at Otjituuo Primary School present a complex picture of partial successes overshadowed by persistent, deep-rooted systemic barriers. While community and educator agency have mitigated some immediate crises, the broader challenges of social justice and equitable policy implementation remain largely unaddressed.

Achievements

Localised pedagogical adaptations, such as the innovative use of “imaginary diameters” and teacher-generated handouts, have facilitated learning in ICT and Arts despite the absence of textbooks. While these measures serve

as temporary fixes, they highlight a significant resource shortfall from what is mandated by the Basic Education Act. Internal surveys have documented critical infrastructure needs, reporting that over 50% of Grade 4B's furniture requires replacement, providing a foundation for future advocacy without passively waiting for regional intervention. Cultural preservation initiatives allow diverse groups to maintain their identities, offering psychological support against cultural erasure in the curriculum. Additionally, the hostel placement for 21 out of 31 Grade 6A learners has noticeably enhanced their well-being by providing essential amenities and a conducive learning environment away from domestic pressures.

Unaddressed challenges

Persistent challenges in education include an “illiteracy gap,” where many learners are unprepared for the workforce or further education, indicating a quality issue rather than just access. School feeding programmes are inadequate, leaving 80% of students hungry, which affects their cognitive abilities. Additionally, the lack of Jul'hoansi language instruction marginalises San families, maintaining a disconnect in education. Bureaucratic inefficiencies further complicate reform efforts by obstructing prompt responses to school needs.

Conclusion

The actions in Otjituuo reflect a strong commitment to education for liberation, yet they are mainly “survival strategies” rather than effective long-term policies. A systemic change is essential to align national funding and curricula with the socioeconomic and cultural requirements of the settlement for the promise of education for all to be realised.

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