

Curriculum Reforms in Namibia: Progress, Derailments, and Possible Solutions for a Competitive Future

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Abstract

The study analyzed the Curriculum Reforms in Namibia's progress, derailments, and possible solutions for a competitive future. Educational reform and curriculum revision are crucial to redressing apartheid colonialism's inequitable and fragmented education system in Namibia and building a responsive curriculum that prepares students for a better future. While noticeable progress is observed regarding access to education, policy development, and curriculum reform, many challenges remain. Thus, this study aimed to review literature from Postcolonial Namibia to determine the causes of Namibia's basic education responsiveness and transformation before and after independence. The paper argues that implementing a responsive curriculum is critical for many reasons. This study employed a qualitative approach encased in a phenomenological interpretive framework with the literary analysis of Namibia's curriculum reform. Additionally, the paper was couched by Moll's Curriculum Responsiveness Theory to determine whether Namibian curricula at various epochs were responsive to learners' and societal needs. The study reveals that curriculum reform is the dominant of politically driven, overly ambitious aspirations in the reform process. Furthermore, the Ministry of Education preaches access to education and curriculum reform without providing adequate teaching resources; classrooms and teachers expected to teach the new curriculum were not trained in content and pedagogy. The study recommends that curriculum revision be aligned with social congruence and not add to the country's education sector's problems.

Keywords: curriculum, derailment, educational reforms, progress

Introduction

With the dawn of democracy in 1990, Namibia was accepted into the global village of nations and entered a new era fraught with challenges. These included the limited knowledge and skills of most of its citizenry, which impeded its ability to engage with other nations in a competitive, technologically advanced, and ever-changing political, economic, social, and cultural environment (Ministry of Education, 1993, p. 14).

To address these challenges and enhance the knowledge and skills of society at the school level, the Namibian government began to develop a new basic education curriculum. The broad curriculum for the education fraternity has undergone many reforms and changes, as reflected in the successive curricula 1993-1995, 1996-2000, 2000-2005, 2005-2007, 2010-2014, and currently 2015 to 2026.

The current curriculum is in place, and its review process began in 2012 (National Institute for Educational Development [NIED], 2021). It started with the reorganization of the school phases and the revision of curriculum content. As of 2012, the Ministry of Education recommended that the curriculum be streamlined and that it should be modified to make it more manageable for both teachers and learners, such that all learners do a minimum of six subjects from 10th grade, as opposed to the nine subjects in the older curriculum. Some of the other changes included the junior secondary phase, which in the reformed curriculum consists of eighth grades

and ninth grade and requires the learners to write junior secondary semi-external examinations at the end of ninth grade bringing the Junior Secondary Certification (JSC) to be done earlier. The senior secondary phase now starts at 10th grade and the National Senior Secondary Certificate Ordinary (NSSCO) level was made to be a two-year course, covered in 10th and 11th grade. Finally, The National Senior Secondary Certificate Higher (NSSCH) level was replaced by the National Senior Secondary Certificate Advanced Subsidiary (NSSCAS) level, a one-year course covered in 12th grade.

The process was lengthy and challenging as consensus has to be reached among the stakeholders because the whole nation has a keen interest in education and reaching a consensus about what learners should learn is complex. The curriculum was revised to give direction to basic education as a crucial step towards realizing Vision 2030 and the aspirations of the national development plans. The revised curriculum ensures the continuity of the foundation principles of the Namibian education system described in Toward Education for All: A Development Brief in 1993 (Ministry of Education, 1993). The goals, aims, competencies, core skills, and key learning areas have been identified in Vision 2030 as a curriculum for the future. The core skills are Learning to learn, Personal skills, Social skills, Cognitive skills, Communication skills, Numeracy skills, and Information and Communication Technology skills, while the learning areas are Languages, Mathematics, Natural Sciences, Social Sciences, Technology, Commerce, Arts, and Physical Education (Kretzer, 2022).

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Vision 2030 sees Namibia as developing from a literate society to a knowledge-based society, where knowledge is constantly being acquired, renewed, and used for innovation to improve the quality of life. A knowledge-based society requires people who are healthy, well-educated, skilled, proactive, and with a broad range of abilities. Through basic education, learners develop the competencies, attitudes, and values needed for full participation in society by learning to use, acquire, construct, evaluate, and transform knowledge. Learning to learn is at the core of this process, and in a knowledge-based society, this continues as lifelong learning.

Countries worldwide are implementing Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4)-Education 2030 and the global commitments articulated in the Incheon Declaration and the Education 2030 Framework for Action. Education is central to the realization of the 2030 agenda for sustainable development. Within the comprehensive 2030 agenda for sustainable development, education is essentially articulated as a stand-alone goal (SDG 4) with its seven outcome targets and three means of implementation. SDG 4 and its corresponding targets aim to ensure inclusive and equitable education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all (Kretzer, 2022). The Republic of Namibia has committed to implementing the SDGs. Therefore, the revised curriculum for Basic Education has been aligned with the aspirations of SDG 4. However, the fundamental question here is whether this commitment by the GRN has been held up to. Do all the Namibian children benefit from these commitments in terms of practicality, or does it just remain lip service to most of the school-going children in Namibia?

Acquainting ourselves with these curriculum reforms and changes and relating them to our teaching and learning experiences, we decided to unpack curriculum reforms in Namibia; Progress, derailments & possible solutions for a competitive future.

Review of the Related Literature

Curriculum and Reform

It is easier to define reform than curriculum. Reform merely means reshaping, reconfiguring, and making a difference (Schubert, 1993, p. 80). A mere change, however, does not mean improvement. So, too, with reform; thus, the saga of reform that we review here is not intended to imply an evolutionary development. Reformers generally hope that the product of their reform will bring about improvement; it is their inspiration to pursue their cause. Therefore, as we think about the many curriculum reforms that Namibian basic education has undergone thus far, we need to ask whether the re-forming was an improvement and probably offers possible solutions. When Namibia emerged as an independent nation in 1990, educational reform as a priority was emphasized by the Hon. President Dr. Sam Nujoma: The only way we can redress the apartheid legacy is by a massive education and training program for our people (Ministry of Education, 1993a).

This reform's primary goals were access, equity, quality, and democracy in education. After independence, the Ministry of Education and Culture faced a daunting task, as Angula & Lewis (1997) describe: The undoing of apartheid requires changing the purpose of schooling from that of selection and the education of an elite to that of education for all. It involves replacing the philosophy and practices of education in the past with a new philosophy and practices appropriate to educating all citizens, a rethinking of 'what we do in schools and how we do it. (p. 237). The Namibian educational reform is guided first and foremost by the policy statements in "Toward Education for All" (Ministry of Education, 1993a). According to this document, the previous educational system in Namibia was about educating an elite in a positivistic system that was based on apartheid and racism.

The new educational system, as described by "Toward Education for All," is built on Learner-Centered Education and is aimed at harnessing curiosity and excitement and promoting democracy and responsibility in lifelong learning. The stated intents of this system are to employ a holistic view of learning, value life experiences and assist learners in integrating school and life outside school. The document identifies learning as an active process with participation from the learners in developing, organizing, implementing, and managing learning (Ministry of Education, 1993a).

According to the above statements, the Namibian educational reform was and is both a change of curriculum development processes and products, but more than that, a transition from one system of education to another (Ministry of Education, 1993a). Changing from one system to another is not easy; reform and change are not necessarily synonymous.

Reforms and Changes

Change and transformation are never simple or easy, as Popkewitz (1988) writes:

We know very little about change... Despite all the well-intentioned efforts to improve our social world, there are no examples where the efforts of men and women have not been transformed as our ideas are moved into the everyday politics of practice (p. 92).

Popkewitz (1988) argues that we must question our assumptions about society, culture, history, economics, and politics to reform and change. Failure to do so, Popkewitz argues, will result, at best, in only window-dressing. Herein we argue that we are perhaps just doing window dressing to our curriculum. There have been numerous complaints in the public sphere about the last curriculum change where learners are ending in grade 11 and only those who achieved certain grades are allowed to continue to AS levels. What the public is asking is, what happened to the not-so-gifted learners? What will become of them as the University of Namibia is adamant that it will not take grade 11 graduates? At worst, rhetoric, and rituals around reform, as echoed by (Kristensen, 2005) that without questioning our underlying assumptions, serve to perpetuate our general myths of schooling as the major institution by which to improve society and the illusion we hold about reform as a way of progressing.

Schools as the major institutions to improve society are viewed as a myth because although the school at certain periods in history can help produce conditions that have the potential for social transformation, they simultaneously reproduce existing relations in society. They do this partly by selecting, organizing, and evaluating knowledge, which gives value only to certain types of knowledge. Knowledge taught in schools is always bound to interests in society, mostly interests of power, and society does not provide all people with the same access to knowledge or power. As such, discourse on reform may function to legitimate the ongoing power relations of schools in a manner that makes those relations seem to benefit all rather than a few (Popkewitz, 1988).

On the other hand, the term curriculum is shrouded in definitional controversy, thus problematic to offer its universal definition. It should be noted that it is not our intention in this paper to conclude and seal the debate on the definition of the term curriculum. For our discussion, we draw from Schubert's (1986) definition of curriculum as whatever is advocated for teaching and learning. This includes both school and non-school environments; overt and hidden curriculums; and broad and narrow notions of content—its development, acquisition, and consequences (Schubert, 1986).

Despite the many reforms in the basic education curriculum in Namibia, learning levels have remained disappointingly low. The general movement away from a traditional curriculum (broadly defined as being 'literate' and teacher-centered with a high degree of subject content) towards a 'competency' or 'outcome-based curriculum (i.e. learner-centered and focused on developing skills and capabilities), has disappointingly done little, if anything, to improve learning outcomes (Cunningham, 2018). Changes to the curriculum have largely failed to change what goes on in classrooms: teaching remains largely didactic, and learners' acquisition of basic literacy and numeracy, the foundational skills on which future learning is built, is woefully low.

As Cunningham (2018) observes, the new curricula in many Southern African Countries, including Namibia, have required several changes to classroom practice. For most of these changes, teachers are ill-prepared for and resistant to make. With perhaps the single exception of changes in the language of instruction, where the use of learners' mother tongue in the initial years is increasingly the norm, observations of classroom practice today are worryingly similar to those of 30 or more years ago. Curriculum reform has not often led to the desired changes in the classroom, nor has it resulted in greater learning. Unrealistic curricula may well have inhibited more incremental change.

Curriculum Responsiveness Theory

The paper is theoretically couched within the framework of the Curriculum Responsiveness Theory. The National Commission on Higher Education (as cited in Mohale, 2023) describes curriculum responsiveness theory as a shift from closed to more open and interactive education systems that adapt to social, cultural, political, and economic environmental changes. This means that the curriculum is structured around what students are expected to take away from teaching and learning and what they can do with the information they acquire. According to McCuddy *et al.* (2008), curriculum responsiveness theory describes what, why, how, and how well students should learn systematically and intentionally to meet the social need for education. Moll (2004), on the other hand, contends that curriculum responsiveness theory refers to the capacity of curricula taught in schools or universities to respond to both student needs and societal situations. This indicates that the curriculum is concerned with what occurs in the classroom and how students apply what they have learned. Thus, curriculum responsiveness theory would address issues of employability and economic adaptability to varied students' needs in the classroom, as well as cultural adaptability (Moll, 2004).

Furthermore, the curriculum should be responsive to economic processes to demonstrate how socially constructed cultural practices are incorporated. Responsiveness is one of the primary motivations for survival in the educational fraternity. Therefore, Curriculum responsiveness theory should include an understanding of the longer-term demands on education resulting from a more universal, encompassing view of its nature and purpose in human affairs (Gay, 2018).

Furthermore, Josua *et al.* (2022) emphasize that, despite the use of curriculum responsiveness theory in higher education, this theory may be equally applicable in education. This is consistent with Moll's (2004) classification of curriculum responsiveness into four dimensions: economic, cultural, disciplinary, and learning-related. This is aligned with education's goal of transforming Namibian society's economic and social-cultural dynamics. However, Gamble (2003) believes that in a country like Namibia, with a long history of corrosive discrimination, it is necessary to develop a curriculum that addresses cultural challenges and respects diversity within the classroom. Economic responsiveness, for example, may extend beyond addressing present labor market demands to include devising long-term solutions to future educational and economic challenges in Namibia.

Despite the lack of theoretical depth in the theory of curriculum responsiveness in education in general, it is crucial to examine the transformation of basic education curricula in Namibia (Josua *et al.*, 2022). The paper simplifies data presentation by employing the Curriculum Responsiveness theory notation to explain how the Namibian curriculum has changed regarding inputs and outputs. The idea highlights the numerous modes of inquiry that circumvent the everyday life activities for which education is expected to prepare, inform, and challenge the Namibian people. Since information is primarily applied, the curriculum must be both current in terms of field research and structured in ways that apply to daily life per Curriculum receptiveness theory.

Objectives

This research was specifically carried out to determine whether Namibian curricula at various epochs were responsive to learners' and societal needs. Furthermore, the paper reviewed literary texts created in English in Postcolonial Namibia to extract information about the causes of the responsiveness and transformation of Namibia's basic education before and after independence.

Methodology

A study is a qualitative approach encased in a phenomenological interpretive framework with the literary analysis of Namibia's curriculum reform. The significance of this approach is in its capacity to provide extensive textual descriptions of the paper's central concerns and how it delivers information about Namibian curriculum reform. Secondary sources such as books, government publications, and academic research reports were also consulted. The paper was couched by Moll's (2004) Curriculum Responsiveness Theory to determine whether Namibian curricula

at various epochs were responsive to learners' and societal needs. Furthermore, the paper reviewed literary texts created in English in Postcolonial Namibia to extract information about the causes of the responsiveness and transformation of Namibia's basic education before and after independence. Equally, the paper incorporated both document analysis and content analysis. The data were interpreted using the theoretical lenses of the study's primary aims. The study conclusions and recommendations were consequent from the interpretation.

Results

Progress in the Namibian Basic Education Curriculum Reforms

Almost every country in Sub-Saharan Africa has implemented educational reforms in the last few decades, most notably in developing a new curriculum (Chisholm & Leyendecker, 2008). Namibia is not an exception. Namibia embarked on a series of reforms in several sectors of the economy, including education, following independence in 1990. The country's education policy, in particular, was focused on achieving four primary goals: access, equity, quality, and democracy (Ministry of Education and Culture, 1993). The National Curriculum for Basic Education (NCBE) builds on the experience and accomplishments of Namibian curricula and syllabuses dating back to 1990 (Fullan & Gallagher, 2017). Since that time, Namibia has seen significant curricular modification. This was conducted to respond to Namibian society's concerns and demands. It is also aimed at expediting the achievement of Namibia Vision 2030's goal of raising Namibians' quality of life to that of their counterparts in the developed world by 2030 (Josua *et al.*, 2022). This speaks to curriculum responsiveness, which entails teaching and assessing students in ways that make explicit the 'rules' of each discipline regarding what constitutes knowledge, how it can be known, and the sanctioned procedures to generate such knowledge (Morrow, 2007).

Namibia's Vision 2030 explains the society Namibia aspires to be and the path it will take to get there. 'A rich and industrialized Namibia, developed by its human resources, enjoying peace, harmony, and political stability,' as per the Vision 2030 (Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 2). Learners must 'develop competencies, attitudes, and values necessary for full involvement in society through learning to use, acquire, construct, evaluate, and transform knowledge' as part of the new curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 2). Critical abilities and skills were identified, taught, and tested due to curriculum revisions. This was primarily accomplished by implementing a learner-centered teaching method, in which planning and instruction revolve around the learner's activities, such as inquiry and problem-solving. These learner characteristics are critical in transforming Namibia into a knowledge-based society, as these learners will use their newly acquired skills and information to propel Namibia's progress toward industrialization.

Following the implementation of these education reforms, such as Education for All (EFA), we commend the Namibian government for introducing new curricula for all grade levels shortly after independence in 1990 as opposed to pre-independence. This was done to align the education system with the five primary aims of the reformed system: equity, access to education, internal efficiency improvement, quality improvement, lifelong learning, and democratic engagement in education (Angula & Lewis, 1997). The implications of these goals, which were targeted toward promoting the EFA vision, are substantial, particularly in curriculum and assessment processes. 'There is no necessity for selection procedures or organized tracking over that period,' according to the Ministry of Education (1993, p. 6). We do not have to worry about selecting students to advance from fourth to fifth grade. All our children should be able to complete fifth grade and beyond.'

Education improvements were also implemented to integrate the curriculum with the MEC's new learner-centered attitude (1993). Learner-centered education is defined as follows by the Ministry of Education (1993, p. 60):

1. The learners' existing knowledge, abilities, interests, and understanding, obtained from previous experience in and out of school, serve as the beginning point.
2. All young people's inherent curiosity and desire to learn, study, and make sense of an expanding world must be fostered and supported through challenging and important tasks.

3. The viewpoint of the students must be valued and considered in the school's work.
4. Learners should be able to think for themselves and take responsibility for one another's learning and overall growth.
5. Learners should be involved as partners in their educational development rather than passive recipients.

A learner-centered curriculum and teaching are intended to apply and assess a wide variety of knowledge and skills relevant to Namibia's goal of becoming a knowledge-based society by 2030 (Ministry of Education, 2009). This we believe, was a good step in the right direction.

As part of this revised curriculum, the examination system was also modified from a "do or die final examination to an assessment that combines the learners' work throughout the year" (Mutuku, 2009, p. 1). This is accomplished through coursework or ongoing assessment activities. Like other aspects of the South African school curriculum, the examination system was created to promote and reflect apartheid ideas (Cohen, 1995). "This emphasis on failure is pervasive throughout the education system, with pupils expecting to fail, teachers expecting them to fail, and examiners setting papers to guarantee that high proportions of students fail," according to the Ministry of Education (1993). (p. 124). Albert (1999, p. 130) summarized the detrimental effects of previous curricula and testing regimes, noting that; "the education system leads to massive school failures, high repetition, and drop-out rates and [has] contributed largely to illiteracy in the country. Those that passed the examinations and left school were not well prepared for the field of work. They mostly lacked work skills and proper thinking skills."

From 2010 to the present, the country has achieved significant strides in education improvement (Ministry of Education, 2015). Namibia has made tremendous efforts and significant investments to expand access to primary education. These efforts have resulted in a huge increase in the number of children enrolled in primary school. Primary enrollment increased from 60% to 95%, the teaching workforce increased by 30%, and 3,000 new classrooms were built (Constantino, 2021). Ministry of Education (2015) acknowledged that the government generated human resources capable of functioning in a knowledge-based economy through education. Educational curriculum reform should be a priority under Vision 2030 to ensure that Namibians are educated, talented, eloquent, inventive, informed, and proactive (Katjavivi, 2016). These actions demonstrate the government's commitment to education as a socioeconomic development and transformation catalyst.

Furthermore, in 2015, the Ministry of Education, Arts, and Culture (MOEAC) reformed the Namibian Basic Education curriculum to improve and cope with the current educational demands (Ministry of Education, 2015). As a result, the whole system must evolve, and teachers must adapt to new changes. To conform to the new curriculum reform, teachers must alter their teaching tactics and fulfill the requirements and desires of learners and other educational stakeholders (Nghihalwa, 2018). All new curricula, without exception, have incorporated one or more of the following basic concepts: competency-based, outcome-based, learner-centered, child-centered, and themed (Nauyoma *et al.*, 2021). While these are not synonymous, they frequently share fundamental approaches and features to alter what and how children learn and make learning more relevant to the social and economic requirements of the twenty-first century. When COVID-19 erupted, for example, about 665,000 learners in Namibia had school disruptions as schools were closed and the curriculum implementation was disrupted (WHO, 2020). Drawing from the COVID-19 situation, it has resulted that the curriculum has been overlooked; therefore, the curriculum reform should be harmonized with current circumstances. From this experience, the Ministry of Education has come up with strategies to mediate the implementation of the curriculum with online implementations.

Furthermore, when schools reopened, the Ministry of Education launched blended learning. Blended learning is intended to analyze and compensate for learning deficits caused by school closures. This was also done to enhance new curricular programs developed without COVID-19 into account, as well as individualized learning remedial and catch-up programs now being implemented. These programs try to refocus instruction and restore lost learning by categorizing learners according to their learning levels..

Derailments

In this paper, we define derailment as the possible obstruction of the curriculum by the curriculum change, thus, diverting it from its intended course. Central to this paper's argument is that curriculum reform should never exceed the education system's capacity to deliver. Education systems often are constrained by several technical challenges that limit their effectiveness. This section briefly deliberates on some of these challenges that are deemed to derail the curriculum from delivering and being responsive.

One major challenge of curriculum reform is the dominance of politics in the reform process. As Cunningham (2018, p. 1) argues, "largely politically driven, overly ambitious aspirations for curriculum change have often ignored the prevailing context." Similarly, Scholars have pointed out that it is reasonably easy for leaders in democratic states such as Namibia, to make a case for improving access because these activities are straightforward, visible, and famous and ignore curriculum responsiveness (Shrestha, 2019). Curriculum responsiveness to learning challenges the stakeholders in education to critically determine and weigh what is taught in their schools and *how* and *why* it is taught.

In Namibia, the Ministry of Education keeps on preaching access to education and reforming the curriculum without making provisions for these reforms. For example, there is no adequate teaching resources and classroom; teachers expected to teach the new curriculum were not trained in preparation for the changes in content and pedagogy. In other words, teachers expected to deliver the revised curriculum are unprepared, unsupported, and poorly resourced. A new or revised curriculum cannot be delivered effectively if the serving and future teachers are not oriented, trained, and supported to be able to teach it. Before the new curriculum is introduced, instructional materials (textbooks, teacher guides, resources, and infrastructure) must be developed and implemented.

Major stakeholders, such as the teachers, learners, and parents, were seldom involved. It is argued that ensuring all stakeholders' effective participation in the curriculum reform process raises practical implementation issues early and has the positive externality of securing buy-in from other stakeholders for the changes (Cunningham, 2018).

Possible Solution for a Competitive Future

In this paper we recommend that future curriculum reforms should ensure that decision making and responsibilities are shared among all the stakeholders; including parents, communities, employers and learners themselves. Moreover, the curriculum that prepares learners for a competitive future is the one which focus not only on academic performance but also on the holistic development of the learners. One which recognise that each learner has his/her own learning abilities and build on these to equip them with necessary skills. Finally curriculum reforms should embrace the content that is aimed at effectively supporting young peoples' learning and well-being in the context of the ever changing societies and economies.

Conclusion

This paper discussed the various curriculum reforms in Namibia's education sector. It provided a brief analysis of factors affecting the effective delivery of the (revised) curriculum responsive to the learners' and societal needs. It should be noted that the paper is not against curriculum revision. On the contrary, it advocates updating the curriculum and embracing the world's current educational trends and knowledge. However, those entrusted with curriculum revisions must ensure that such revisions are congruent with societal needs and do not add to the challenges already associated with the country's education sector. The paper has provided some reasons why implementing a responsive curriculum is critical.

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