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## EDUCATIONAL CHANCES OF CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES IN THE REPUBLIC OF NAMIBIA

Abstract

The main aim of this paper is to present the current situation of children with disabilities in the Republic of Namibia, with special regard to their educational chances and influence of cultural beliefs on their lives. Namibia has a law, which entitles education for all its citizens. Despite numerous legislative acts which should have increased the educational chances of Namibian children with disabilities, their real situation is completely different and depends on various factors, including the infrastructure of the schools, teacher competencies, their attitudes towards students, the small number of special and integrated schools as well as an insufficient amount of money transferred for the education of the children. The paper discusses all of the above factors and provides practical implications, which would improve the situation of children with disabilities in Namibia.

**Keywords:** children, disability, educational chances, cultural beliefs

## SZANSE EDUKACYJNE DZIECI Z NIEPEŁNOSPRAWNOŚCIĄ W REPUBLICIE NAMIBII

Abstrakt

Głównym celem artykułu jest przedstawienie aktualnej sytuacji dzieci z niepełnosprawnością w Republice Namibii, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem ich szans edukacyjnych oraz wpływu wierzeń kulturowych na ich życie. Republika Namibii posiada prawo, które uprawnia wszystkich jej obywateli do edukacji. Pomimo licznych aktów prawnych, które miały zwiększyć szanse edukacyjne namibijskich dzieci z niepełnosprawnością, ich rzeczywista sytuacja jest zupełnie inna i zależy od wielu czynników, w tym między innymi infrastruktury szkół, kompetencji nauczycieli, ich stosunku do uczniów, małej liczby szkół specjalnych i integracyjnych, a także niewystarczającej ilości pieniędzy, przekazywanych na kształcenie dzieci. W artykule omówiono wszystkie z powyższych czynników i zaprezentowano praktyczne implikacje, które poprawiłyby sytuację dzieci z niepełnosprawnością w Republice Namibii.

**Słowa kluczowe:** dzieci, niepełnosprawność, szanse edukacyjne, wierzenia kulturowe

“Education is (...) the foundation of a free  
and fulfilled life.

It is the right of all children and the  
obligation of all governments”

(Bellamy 1999, 19).

## INTRODUCTION

The inspiration for this paper comes from the author's visit to the Republic of Namibia, due to his research conducted in selected primary schools. The situation of children with disabilities on the African continent constitutes one of the most present, although complex issues, remaining in the focus of special pedagogues who work for international non-governmental organizations or specialized United Nations agencies in which a majority of activities are aimed at providing humanitarian help to developing countries in the field of children and youth education. The most meaningful argument, which can be quoted here to justify the necessity of turning the attention of the international community on this matter, is the statistical data of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, which show that only 2 percent of children with disabilities living in developing countries can attend school (Laurin-Bowie 2005, 54). Many children with disabilities in Namibia do not have access to special education (Chitiyo et al. 2016, 5).

Keeping in mind the mentioned statistics, it was decided that the aim of this paper would be to present the situation of Namibian children with disabilities in the context of educational chances and African cultural beliefs, which determine their existence. Prior to presenting the selected aspects related to the situation of Namibian children with disabilities, it is worth mentioning the brief characteristics of the Republic of Namibia.

### 1. BRIEF CHARACTERISTICS OF THE REPUBLIC OF NAMIBIA

The Republic of Namibia is a country located by the Atlantic Ocean, in the southwestern part of Africa. Its area covers 512,200 square miles (*Encyklopedia popularna PWN* 1999, 549). The name of the country comes from the *Namib* desert running 1,245 miles along the west coast, which in one of the oldest languages of the local population means “giant” (Anderson & Bridge 1994, 330) or “a place where there is nothing” (Warner 2004, 93). The population of this country is estimated at over 2 million citizens (Ministry of Education 2008, 2). Based on statistical data obtained during the Namibian census in 2001, it was found that there were approximately 85,000 citizens with disabilities in the country, who accounted for 5 percent of the total population (*Disability Policy Audit* 2008, 25). In 2008, it was estimated that the number of students with various special educational needs in Namibia was 27,880 (Ministry of Education 2008, 18). However, students with disabilities were estimated

at barely 2,953 children (Ministry of Education 2008, 3). Recent statistics show that there are over 21,000 children with disabilities aged between 6 and 19 years, constituting 3.3 percent of the national population of that age, and 65 percent of these children are attending school. Comparing the above statistics with 79 percent of able-bodied children who attend school it can be implied that there are 4,600 more children with disabilities not attending school (UNICEF Namibia 2015, 29).

The capital of Namibia is the city of Windhoek, which hosts the most important national institutions as well as the seat of the University of Namibia, attended by over 30,000 students annually (University of Namibia 2019). Namibia's official languages are English and Afrikaans. Namibia is a country which became a German colony in 1884, officially called German South-West Africa (*Encyklopedia popularna PWN* 1999, 549). Over the next several decades, the country was under the jurisdiction of the Union of South Africa (now the Republic of South Africa), the League of Nations, then the United Nations Council, and finally in 1989, as a result of international negotiations, obtained independence. Before Namibia gained its sovereignty, for many years it had borrowed apartheid policy from the Republic of South Africa, which meant racial segregation and discrimination of indigenous African population by white descendants of Dutch settlers, called as Afrikaners (*The New Oxford Dictionary of English* 1998, 75; Okoth 2006, 155). The repercussions of apartheid politics still seem to be felt today by some black Namibian citizens.

Regarding the Namibian economy, one of its leading branches is mining, and more specifically, the mining of diamonds, uranium, lead and copper. Apart from the extraction of natural resources, other well-developed industrial areas in Namibia are the food industry, sheep and cattle breeding, fisheries and leather industry (*Encyklopedia popularna PWN* 1999, 549). Despite rich natural resources, and thus potential employment opportunities for unemployed citizens, the level of unemployment in the country is 37 percent (International Bank for Reconstruction and Development 2009, 12). An additional inconvenience in Namibians' everyday lives is the deficit of water resulting from the dry tropical climate prevailing in this country. All of the above information about Namibia will help the reader to understand the situation of Namibian children with disabilities.

## 2. EDUCATIONAL CHANCES OF NAMIBIAN CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

Namibia annually spends more money on education than any other country on the African continent (United States Agency 2006) 19.1 percent of its budget, which is 7.7 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP) (UNICEF 2018, 3). Additionally, after Namibia gained independence, in accordance with ratified international declarations and agreements (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, World Declaration on Education for All, Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education, Dakar Framework for Action, Education for All, Millennium Development Goals, Cali Commitment to

Equity and Inclusion in Education), a new law was passed to entitle all its citizens to education. This law is the Constitution of the Republic of Namibia, proclaimed in 1990 in which, in Article 20, it was written: "All persons shall have the right to education" (Constitution of the Republic of Namibia 1998, 14). This provision coincides with Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, which states that: "Everyone has the right to education" (Universal Declaration of Human Rights 2015, 54). The right of Namibian children with disabilities to education is regulated by the National Policy on Disability, which states that "the Government shall ensure that children and youth with disabilities have the same right to education as non-disabled children. Education for all can only be achieved if all children have access to schooling" (*Government Gazette* 2004, 17). One of the assumptions of this policy is to base the education of students with disabilities "on the fundamental principles of inclusive education which demand that all children shall be taught together, whenever possible, regardless of individual differences or difficulties they may have" (*Government Gazette* 2004, 18). Common education of able-bodied children along with disabled children is implemented on the basis of the National Policy on Inclusive Education (*Government Gazette* 2004, 2), Sector Policy on Inclusive Education (2013), the Fifth National Development Plan, the Child Care and Protection Act (2015), Goal 4 of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (2015) and a number of other documents that precisely regulate its course.

Despite numerous procedures and legal regulations aimed at increasing the educational chances of Namibian children with disabilities, their real situation within this range completely differs from the accepted standards. Therefore, the real image of learning opportunities for children with disabilities in Namibia consists of many different factors, including the infrastructure of the schools, teacher competencies, their attitudes towards students, the small number of special and integration schools, as well as an insufficient amount of money transferred for the education of these children.

Analyzing the situation of students with disabilities in the context of the infrastructure of Namibian educational institutions, it can be noted that schools located in the north of the country are definitely in worse condition than schools in the south. Most of the schools in the north do not have an infrastructure adapted to the needs of children with disabilities. They lack sanitary facilities, running water, telephone access and electricity. School buildings are often built in a traditional way, for instance with sticks and mud, covered with metal sheets or in the form of tents, in which practically classes are conducted outdoors. Especially during the wintertime or the rainy season, the construction of the classrooms imposes burdens for teachers and their students (Ministry of Education 2008, 4). An additional barrier for children with disabilities is that the distance between the school they attend and their home is often too far (Ministry of Education 2008, 3).

Another issue which has a significant impact on the educational chances of Namibian children with disabilities is the teachers' competencies and their attitudes towards them. One of the main reasons for the frequent lack of appropriate

teachers' competencies in work with Namibian children with disabilities is the fact that the idea of integrated education and disability-related topics are very rarely raised during studies preparing future educators. The rare reference to the issue of special education during teachers' education process comes from a belief in the necessity of educating children with disabilities by specially trained teachers. Thus, an insufficient level of knowledge within a range of integrated education prevents ordinary teachers from forming an opinion about students with disabilities, which would allow them to work with such children and break the stereotypical, often harmful approach of society towards children affected by disability. Another reason for the teachers' low level of competencies is their poor English language skills which are *sine qua non* condition to conducting classes with children. Apart from the teachers' poor language skills another factor which has an important impact on working with children with disabilities and non-disabled children is the lack of teachers' sufficient motivation, which results from their poor housing conditions and unavailability of public transport (Ministry of Education 2008, 16).

In addition to the above restrictions on universal access for children and youth with disabilities to integrated and special schools another obstacle to their education is the small number of such facilities across the country. According to statistical data from 2007, out of 1,661 schools in Namibia, only 9 of them were special schools for students with disabilities (Ministry of Education 2008, 3). In addition, only a few integrated schools and special classes operate mainly in the south of Namibia. The number of special and integrated schools in this country does not meet the demands for such facilities at all. Despite the growing number of mainstream schools, which increased up to 1,884 in 2018 (Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture 2018, 1), there are still 9 special schools „which cater for only 3.020 of children with disabilities” (UNICEF 2017, 8).

Among all the reasons why educational chances for children with disabilities are still relatively small, the most frequently outlined argument is the lack of sufficient financial means to implement existing legal provisions that directly refer to the idea of integrated and special education in Namibia.

### 3. CULTURAL BELIEFS AND THE SITUATION OF CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES IN THE REPUBLIC OF NAMIBIA

People's cultural beliefs are an indispensable element of most cultures. According to one of the definitions of cultural beliefs they are defined as “the ideas and thoughts common to several individuals that govern interaction – between these people, and between them, their gods, and other groups – and differ from knowledge in that they are not empirically discovered or analytically proved” (Greif 1994, 915). For most of the modern societies of the African continent, cultural beliefs are still very important. This rule affects also the Namibian society, which is still influenced by cultural beliefs, despite the ruling laws passed to ensure equality to all its citizens, including those with

disabilities. The two most important implications that stem from Namibian society's cultural beliefs include looking for supernatural causes that might be a reason for a child's disability and their negative attitude towards them. The negative attitude towards people with disabilities that has been perpetuated for centuries is now gradually transforming and is the best evidence for the growing number of people, including parents of children with disabilities, who express their approval and support for their full integration with the rest of society. Due to the relatively recent research conducted by Cynthia Haihambo from the University of Namibia and Elizabeth Lightfoot from the University of Minnesota, it was possible to distinguish eight myths that Namibians associate with the occurrence of a child's disability in the family (Haihambo & Lightfoot 2010). The first myth is the belief that a child's disability is the result of witchcraft. There are two theories related to this belief. As the authors of the research claim: "The first theory is that a jealous rival bewitched the family that bears a child with a disability" (Haihambo & Lightfoot 2010, 80). Further, they state: "The second theory is that the family that bears a child who is born with a disability practiced witchcraft and failed to fulfill all the requirements of the witchdoctor" (Haihambo & Lightfoot 2010, 80). The second belief is that a child's disability is God's punishment for its' own or the parents' sins. The third myth is related to the statement that the disability of a child is the result of an ancestor's curse or a bad omen. The fourth belief, which is in some contradiction with the other myths, is that a child's disability is a gift from God. The fifth myth includes an assumption that the disability of a child was caused by the mother assigning the child's conception to a man who is not the biological father. The sixth belief is associated with the conviction that a child's disability is the consequence of blaming its' black mother for having intercourse with a white man or ghost. The seventh myth is that the child's disability was caused by the mother having sex with a man other than the father of the child in the presence of the child or while still breastfeeding. The last, eighth belief contains activities undertaken by the mother during conception or pregnancy that led to disability. These activities include the consumption of certain types of food products by a pregnant woman that may cause the disability of a child. An example is eating a large amount of fish by a mother which may be the cause of the child's future hyperactivity. On the other hand, it is supposed that consuming hot spices by a woman may lead to blindness of her child (Haihambo & Lightfoot 2010, 82). One of the most absurd Namibian myths is the belief that an individual can be infected with a disability or that it is the parents' punishment for not attending temple (Haihambo & Lightfoot 2010, 78).

Apart from the above myths there also can be distinguished beliefs which become a direct reason for causing harm to a child. An example of such belief would be a situation where twins of the same sex are born and their parents are willing to kill one of them to protect the rest of the family from death or other misfortune. Another example relates to children suffering from albinism, commonly known as albinos. Part of the Namibian society is convinced of the need to kill such children in order to avoid a curse (Haihambo & Lightfoot 2010, 77). In the face of numerous

superstitions, especially Namibian fathers cannot withstand the pressure caused by a child's disability so they decide to leave their families. They justify their decision to leave by saying that their family never had in the past a child with a disability.

#### SUMMARY

Summarizing this brief description of educational chances of children with disabilities in the Republic of Namibia it should be stressed that this paper does not exhaust the issue but it constitutes an attempt to present conditions in which they live and learn. Particular attention has been paid to two aspects of the living conditions of children with disabilities, that are educational chances and cultural beliefs. Based on the information presented in this paper, it can be concluded that the situation of Namibian children with disabilities is very difficult regarding their access to education and social attitudes towards them. Using the information presented in this article, a few practical implications can be made to improve their living conditions. First of all, the key to fighting the social exclusion of Namibian children with disabilities is education of the whole society, which should start in kindergartens. It is only in this way that people's attitudes towards children with disabilities will change. Secondly, the quality of education of future teachers should be improved, with particular emphasis on improving their language skills. Thirdly, the number of integration schools should be increased, especially in the north of Namibia. Special support should be given to non-governmental organizations dealing with the early diagnosis of children with disabilities. Fourthly, harmful attitudes towards individuals with disabilities, associated with African cultural beliefs should be fought in social campaigns. During the implementation of the above recommendations, it should be remembered that all initiatives related to combating the social exclusion of individuals with disabilities, the dignity and rights of all involved people must be respected.

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