QUALITY TEACHERS FOR EFA

Capacity Development for Quality in Pre and Lower Primary Teacher Education in Namibia

2014
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National Report of Action Research initiative in 28 case-study schools in Namibia focused on the pre- and lower primary grades

Part I: Observation Phase

UNESCO/China Funds-in-Trust (UNESCO CFIT)
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Ministry of Education (MoE)
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The success of this study relied heavily on the efforts and contributions from all involved researchers affiliated with the University of Namibia, Ministry of Education, and teachers from all 14 regions.

November 2014
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Summary

A multi-disciplinary research project brings together Namibian educators to create a shared vision for improving primary education. The project is part of a framework that aims to accelerate progress towards the attainment of quality Education for All and the education-related Millennium Development Goals, by enhancing the capacity of the teacher education system to train adequate numbers of qualified teachers in beneficiary countries. The project brought together the entire education community to create a sense of responsibility for establishing an agenda to meet the goals for high levels of academic success. Educators from different sectors of society often work in isolation; this project minimized such isolation by drawing on the shared expertise of various stakeholders to build a stronger, more unified foundation for educational achievement in Namibia. Multiple stakeholders learned from each other as they participated in the research process, analysis of data, and recommendations for change.
Project Background

On March 2, 2012, UNESCO and the Government of the People’s Republic of China signed a Funds-in-Trust agreement. The agreement’s main goal is to support the capacity development needs of eight African countries in relation to teacher education and professional development. The project aims to accelerate progress towards the attainment of quality Education for All and the education-related Millennium Development Goals, by enhancing the capacity of the teacher education system to train adequate numbers of qualified teachers in beneficiary countries. Namibia is one of the initial three countries to benefit from this support.

A needs assessment study was conducted to identify capacity development needs in Namibian teacher education and training so that these can be addressed through a three to four year project. The study was guided by a Namibian team and made use of previous studies, analysis of Namibian education data, interviews and discussions. Based on the main findings of the needs assessment study, it was recommended that UNESCO should work with the Ministry of Education, the University of Namibia (UNAM), and other stakeholder to develop a project, the strategic objective of which would be to improve the quality of pre- and lower primary education through enhanced teacher education and training. Findings from the needs assessment study include the following:

- One of the main challenges affecting the quality of education in Namibia is that many learners in the first few grades of primary education are not achieving the desired levels of literacy and numeracy, despite some recent encouraging improvements. This affects the performance of learners higher up in the education system, and perhaps for life.
- Namibia has made significant strides in training most of its teachers. However, the most under-qualified teachers are still to be found teaching the lower grades of primary education.
- In general, Namibia is experiencing challenges in equitably managing teacher supply and demand, and also in managing the recruitment and deployment of teachers. A policy on teachers is lacking. There is no professional body for teachers. NIED has inadequate capacity to support the development of lower primary education.
- The demand for pre-school and lower primary education teachers is increasing. The government is introducing pre-school classes in a phased, pro-poor sequence. Free primary education was introduced in 2013 and indications are that this will significantly increase demand for pre-primary and lower primary education.
- Namibia has good telecommunications infrastructure and some expertise in the use of ICTs for education, including open and distance learning, e-learning, educational broadcasting and blended learning.
- There is an urgent need to increase the number and skills of teachers engaged in pre-school and lower primary education, using both pre-service and in-service education and training. Some teacher-educators engaged at this level also need support. ICTs should be used as appropriate to make this process as effective and economical as possible.

Following this needs assessment conducted in Namibia, a national team of education experts, steering the design of the project, agreed to focus the interventions on improving the capacity of teacher educators to train students and teachers in teaching literacy and numeracy in the pre- and lower primary grades.
The following are the specific objectives of the project.

1. Strengthen the capacity of Pre and Lower Primary teacher educators, key personnel of the Ministry of Education and students of the Department of Early Childhood and Lower Primary Education in:
   - Action research and applied studies in literacy and numeracy acquisition.
   - Development of learning materials to be used in the acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills in Namibian languages;
   - Integration of ICTs in the development of instructional materials.

2. Strengthen the capacity of the Ministry of Education and UNAM to develop advocacy materials to create awareness and recruit more students for pre and lower primary.

3. Improve systems of Ministry of Education (including the Directorate of Planning and Development, NIED, and Regional Education Offices) to manage the demand and supply, recruitment and deployment of teachers.

4. Establish a virtual forum of Namibian lower primary teachers and lecturers. The forum is facilitated by staff members of UNAM, NIED and regional offices of the Ministry of Education, who have been trained for the purpose.

As a first important step in the project, and to inform further proceedings, a country-wide action research initiative in the Namibian pre- and lower primary classrooms was conceptualized and implemented. The action research project sought to bring together the entire education community to create a shared vision and sense of responsibility for establishing an agenda to meet the goals for...
high levels of academic success. To develop personal ownership and commitment, the project involved multiple stakeholders throughout the country to play an integral role throughout the entire process of the project.

This national action research report serves as a consolidated final outline of the process, with a discussion of the main findings followed by recommended strategies for intervention.

**Project Approach/Methodology**

The framework guiding this project is a “capacity development model” that includes the major educational institutions in the country as well as teachers and administrators from all fourteen regions in Namibia. The specificities of the project were discussed and conceptualized by the National Coordinating Committee, consisting of key personnel of the three main partners in the project: UNESCO, the University of Namibia (UNAM) Faculty of Education and the Ministry of Education (MoE), the latter with representation of the various directorates relevant to the project; Higher Education, Programmes and Quality Assurance (PQA), Planning and Development, Namibian Institute for Educational Development (NIED). Inclusion of these varied sectors of the educational community set the stage for a country-wide collaborative endeavour.

The design of the study relies on a qualitative approach that incorporates an action research process. Before making changes in classroom practices of primary teachers, it is vital for educators to know and understand existing practices; the action research therefore sought to inform the type of intervention needed in Namibian classrooms. The participating schools were selected based on a set of criteria which included the different Namibian official languages of instruction in the early grades and the rural or urban characteristics of schools’ locations. Two classrooms, generally the pre-primary and the Grade 1 classroom, comprised the study’s sample group, resulting in an overall research sample of 56 classrooms.

The project followed a cyclical action research model based on the works of Coghlan & Brannick, (2005) to support the research process. The planning stage involved working with participants with diverse skills and background at the beginning of the project. As a first step, in February 2014, a three day training workshop on research protocol development was organized in Windhoek, and brought together the different stakeholders in the project and research; MoE key personnel, UNAM lecturers and a selection of teachers, principals and regional subject advisors were represented. Designed by a core research team consisting of cross-organizational professionals, the workshop aimed to build capacity and focused on protocols to help new and inexperienced researchers gain and refine basic research skills, all in the framework of an overall preparation for the action research initiative. The specific objectives of the workshop were (a) to create an action research project to empower teachers and lecturers to enhance young children's learning; (b) to build trust and learn from shared experiences; and (c) to assign roles and responsibilities and agree on a joint work plan for the case studies.

Attendance records indicate strong participation throughout the conference, which reflects a high level of engagement and commitment. Over 120 educators from different backgrounds discussed the issues and challenges of teaching and learning at the junior primary level. Working groups were intentionally mixed to provide different educational backgrounds and expertise. The discussions focused on examining the status of literacy and numeracy instruction in Pre-Primary and Grade 1.
Ultimately a set of central questions emerged that participants believed would help propel the research agenda:

1) Which strategies are used by teachers to teach literacy and numeracy?
2) What kind of factors support or hinder the learning of primary students?
3) What kind of support is available and needed for teachers and learners to benefit at the primary level?

Following the workshop and based on the above research questions, the core research team developed and finalized a data collection toolkit to standardize and ensure uniform procedures throughout the stages of data collection. The toolkits consisted of questionnaires for the teachers, observation forms, journal templates for the teachers and above all, clear guidelines on how to conduct the research. Together with the toolkit, the researchers were also provided with a tablet to facilitate the data collection, and to advance the use of technology throughout the research in particular and in the classroom practice in general. The core research team also created a training video that provided key elements from the workshop for those who could not attend. The video included the background of the project, a presentation on action research, instructions for using the research tool kit, and a demonstration on how to use the electronic tablet.

The action research methodology, an informed approach to problem-solving in education, was deliberately selected for this study. The research intended to portray the Namibian classroom practices in the lower grades and represent the institutional capacity to conduct action research. In addition to informing the future activities of the overall project in terms of intervention, the action research also served as a capacity building exercise for the UNAM Department of Early Childhood and Lower Primary Education and MoE key personnel. The focus lays on strengthening the capacity in action research to analyse teaching practices and circumstances concerning the acquisition of literacy and numeracy with the view of informing the curriculum and teaching/lecturing practices.

Teams of 4-6 researchers that included a combination of two teachers, MoE and UNESCO key personnel and at least one faculty member from the Lower Primary department at the University of Namibia gathered data during a two-month period. The research teams spent two one-week time periods observing and gathering teacher and classroom data. All teams used a classroom observation checklist and semi-structured interview form. Teachers responded to specific prompts in their reflective journals to reflect on teaching strategies and the impacts on student learning.

Classroom observations, interviews, and reflections provided the data for the case studies for each school. Research teams followed guidelines to standardize the format and allow for rich descriptions of the context and classrooms of all 28 schools. A regional report was developed from the school reports in each region, where the two research teams from each region worked together to create a single report reflecting information on the participating schools in all 14 regions of the country. The final analysis and sharing of the data from the regional case study reports occurred during a two-day “National Consultative” meeting that brought together representative researchers from all regions. Having representation from all the involved education sectors, as well as people from different regions with different roles enabled rich conversations with varied perspectives.

The collected data was first analysed on a school level, resulting in 28 school reports; the teams followed a developed template for the reports, providing rich descriptive data of the school,
teachers, teaching strategies, and classroom practices. Teacher interviews and reflections as well as classroom observations provided the sources for the school reports. These school reports were then regionally consolidated into 14 regional reports. Well-articulated report-writing guidelines were developed to make sure all reports contained content related to the original research questions. The template guided the writing teams to capture the nuances of the region and to generate a rich level of discussions especially related to areas of institutional and teacher capacity building. Workshops were additionally organized on all the UNAM satellite campuses to facilitate the regional report writing process. These workshops were facilitated by an outside consultant; it was her role to assist the teams in identifying themes and patterns from the two schools in each region, and to encourage a standard for the reports.

Following the completed regional analysis, a National Consultative Meeting was organized with relevant stakeholders and researchers to disseminate and discuss the findings of the 14 regional reports and the action research process so far. The team identified themes and patterns from all reports, and generated a list of intervention strategies to address the findings. Having representation from all the involved education sectors, as well as people from different regions with different roles enabled rich conversations with varied perspectives.

This national report consolidates all data and the entire process, and formulates recommendations and strategies for intervention. These strategies will eventually be implemented during the action research intervention component.

**Limitations**

Embarking on a large-scale research requires time to understand the process as well as conduct the research. The timing (beginning of academic year), distance of faculty participants and predetermined funding limited the training of all researchers, resulting in challenges of understanding the detailed steps involved in the process. While the National Coordinating committee created a video, attempting to provide background on the project, providing an overview of action research, and training on the use of the toolkit, we acknowledge that a more systematic training process prior to the start of the data collection would have maximized understanding, expectations, and ownership of the project.

In the report writing guidelines, researchers were instructed to “draw conclusions related to the main issues preventing and facilitating quality education in the teaching and learning of literacy and numeracy.” Quality education has many definitions and as a group, we did not specifically discuss how quality education is defined in the Namibian context. We recognize that in the absence of an articulated and shared understanding of quality, the conclusions in the report relied on individual perspectives of quality education. Utilizing research, expertise, and understanding of the Namibian context to create a common understanding of quality education would have supported more focused analysis of the data. However, from the data and its analysis, a shared definition for quality education in the Namibian context can start emerging.
Action Research Process: Institutional Capacity Building

From the researcher perspective participants experienced a good sense of cooperation with team members, had good rapport with school personnel and felt welcomed in the schools. For many researchers the experience provided new insight into the realities of a classroom and gained ideas on ways to improve their own teaching. The data discussed in the written reports show there is variation in descriptive and analytical reporting of classroom practices. While many researchers summarized the vast amount of data into clear descriptive reports, it was more challenging to use that information to draw conclusions related to the main issues preventing and facilitating quality education in the teaching and learning of literacy and numeracy.

Research process

The case studies were organized at 28 schools. Each team consolidated all the data into a school report. Guidelines and timelines were developed to facilitate the report writing. Following the school reports, the members of the project’s National Coordinating Committee agreed to consolidate the 2 school reports of each region into regional reports. These regional reports would then be foundational to the National Consultative Meeting and the final national report. Comprehensive guidelines with defined categories were developed to facilitate the regional report writing. Regional workshops, facilitated by an external consultant, were organized on the campuses to facilitate the regional report writing. The idea of these workshops was to assist in finalizing the regional reports and validate conclusions to make sure that they were comprehensive and based on evidence.

Main challenges

Many lecturers understood the research as a learning opportunity and used the experience in the classroom to inform their own teaching practice. The majority of the researchers enjoyed the data collection and analysis, and strengthened their research capacity in the process, as is evidenced by the following statements: “The research has given us the opportunity to acquaint ourselves with the situation on the ground that allows us an opportunity to rethink our practice thereby improving our practice in responding to the needs of the society (schools) as teacher trainers,” “The research has empowered my everyday instruction. I have a stronger sense of what happens in the lower primary classrooms.”

However, throughout the research process, capacity gaps, related to a limited research culture, have also been identified. This can be viewed as partly institutional in the sense that the majority of the lecturers were required to start managing within a university/research culture after the teacher training colleges merged with the University of Namibia (UNAM) in 2010. This became a significant development opportunity for the staff that automatically became part of the university Faculty of Education. Research had not been an integral part of their workload prior to the merger, and many have found it challenging to internalize research as part of their comprehensive professional practice. For some lecturers it was challenging to see the action research process as a personal capacity building exercise. The written reports reflect a range of research experiences; some researchers had significantly more experience with research than others. Proficient academic writing in English varied throughout all reports.
Summary points of Action Research Process: Institutional Capacity Building

- Enjoyment of being in a school setting
- Positive opportunities to work with colleagues
- Challenges preparing multiple written reports in a short timeframe
- Limited use of research to inform practice
- Minimal culture of embracing research as professional practice

Action Research Data: Classroom Situation

Guided by the research guidelines and tools from the research toolkit, 28 research teams conducted multiple observations to prepare individual case studies of classroom situations that portrayed stories of teaching and learning in numeracy and literacy in pre-primary and grade 1 classrooms. This national report summarizes the findings from all 42 reports (28 school reports + 14 regional reports) and discusses highlights and challenges.

The data from a teacher perspective reveal that the majority of teacher participants have strong relationships with their learners and are passionate and enthusiastic about their work with young children. Many teachers in the study discussed challenges related to classroom management, multiple languages, large class size and adequate resources. Additionally observations revealed that teachers relied on limited strategies to engage learners at different levels in numeracy and literacy instruction.

The first section describes positive features that do not reflect challenges, rather facilitate quality education provision. These findings are related to classroom management, teacher learner interactions and classroom climate at both grade levels. The second section reflects five challenging themes identified in the general classroom practices. These are teachers’ capacity, resources, support structures, assessment and system related aspects. The final section discusses the specific variables of the research: numeracy, literacy, pre-primary and Grade 1.

The format for this discussion includes a general discussion of the major findings for each variable, quotes from school reports that reflect and provide insight related to the findings, followed by a bullet pointed summary. Some sections begin with specific school data in the form of a chart that contains symbols representing positive (+), negative (-) or mixed results (/).

Positive highlights

Classroom Climate

Teacher Learner Relationships

Teacher learner interactions in 28 schools

The majority of the data describes classrooms where teachers use the learners’ name when addressing them. Learners were acknowledged for their contributions and were encouraged to support other learners. Teachers were warm and accepting of diversity in their classes. An example can be found in the following quote: “At one point, the Grade 1 teacher saw a learner shivering from
the cold and advised her to go sit by the fire (there for the school feeding program). Culturally, sitting at the fire is used for providing warmth, light and a source of nutrition and energy, but it also has symbolic meaning: that of acceptance. Only those that are accepted as members of the family or clan can sit at the fire.” Another example that reflects many classroom interactions reads as follows: “The learners would easily relate to the teacher; this was characterized by a peaceful environment in the class where learners were free to express themselves. They would approach the teacher if they needed help, although not all requests were related to the topics being taught but more to personal requests.” Many researchers observed fair treatment as evidenced by the following quote: “The teacher acknowledges learners’ contributions and treats all class members equally. During individual practice time, she uses their names and shows appreciation towards the learners’ efforts.” The selected quotes are reflective of information presented in the majority of the reports.

Enthusiasm for Teaching

Teacher enthusiasm in 28 schools

Overall, teachers demonstrated a great amount of enthusiasm for teaching and for the learners in their classrooms. They acknowledged multiple challenges associated with their context, yet for the most part talked enthusiastically about their work. When teachers reflected in their journals or during their interviews with the researchers, most reported they “loved the learners and teaching.” One report states, “The learners and teachers are enthusiastic about what they are doing. Learners raise their hands regularly to share, and often their hand raising includes raising out of their seats and making sounds to be recognized.”

Classroom Management Skills

This discussion of classroom management focuses on observations related to an orderly and systematic learning environment, fairness, consistency of teacher interactions, and attention to the emotional and physical needs of the child. Managing a large group and addressing intellectual needs is discussed in the teachers’ capacity section.

The majority of pre-primary teachers provide a systematic learning environment for their learners and pay particular attention to the emotional and physical needs of the child. Many of these teachers stated that they entered teaching because of their love for young children. This attitude is reflected in the passionate way they interact with learners, address them by name, and demonstrate affection to all learners. Generally the classrooms were orderly and it was clear learners knew and followed expectations for behaviour. Classroom rules were posted on the walls and many teachers would refer to these rules when learners needed reminders about appropriate behaviours.

“The teacher would hug learners and motivate them to do their best.”

“The classroom is organized in a learner centred manner although there was limited space to move around. The language lesson always started on the mat with a story to keep them focused. She is a true mother figure and shows passion, but is very firm. Learners know when to be quiet, to joke and they all laugh together.”
Although the evidence for strong classroom management was consistently positive in the pre-primary grades, this was not the same for Grade 1 classrooms. Many of the Grade 1 classrooms appeared to be overcrowded and had a large number of learners with limited space and furniture. Additionally, language was a challenge and often the medium of instruction did not match the learners’ and often the teachers’ first language. Class size, background of learners and language affected classroom management especially regarding a systematic and orderly environment. Many researchers observed lots of shouting from the teacher, and misbehaviour among the learners that included hitting, clothes pulling and throwing objects in the classrooms. There was a small majority of teachers in Grade 1 classrooms that reflected strong classroom management skills.

“The Lower primary teacher would find herself at time frustrated with the behaviour of the learners who would all scream and shout to get her attention.”

“Grade 1 class had special children and according to the teacher a special grade was supposed to be started in the school but nothing has been done. This causes so much irritation on the part of the teacher. In fact sometimes she did not know what to do. Often she will shout at the learners, especially when they failed to follow instruction or failed to provide answers.”

Main challenges

Teachers’ capacity

The research teams have made multiple observations related to teachers’ capacity; challenges are faced in terms of conceptual knowledge, teaching strategies, classroom management skills, questioning strategies and self-reflection.

Conceptual knowledge for teaching

First, according to the research teams, a great amount of the observed teachers do not seem to possess deep conceptual and pedagogical knowledge of the acquisition of literacy and numeracy concepts and skills in the early grades. The latter may relate to the fact that many teachers lack qualifications for the early primary grades. Instruction remains on a basic knowledge level without much depth and breadth in the learning of content.

This limited conceptual knowledge is also related to the challenges that teachers face in the practice of self-reflection. Many of the teachers are unable to indicate why they do certain things in a certain way. It may be that teachers’ limited conceptual knowledge contributes to the following challenges observed throughout the study.

“Both teachers did not expose deep knowledge of how to teach literacy and numeracy; they both substantially lacked theoretical background, making them unable to explain why certain things are handled in a certain way or to write meaningful reflections of their practice.”
“Using a recently published picture dictionary which was written in three languages, the teacher’s strategy was to read each word aloud to the class in all three languages and then they were to repeat it after him. Although he had several copies of the dictionary in his cupboard, he did not hand them out to the learners. When asked why he did not hand them out, he had no answer and simply replied that he will do that the next time.”

Teaching strategies and classroom management skills

Teaching strategies and classroom management related to instruction in 28 schools

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The majority of the teachers used a limited range of teaching strategies, relying heavily on choral response and repetition, usually with the expectation that learners should shout out the correct response. Because of little learner interaction with the content, the choral response does not match the appropriate developmental and knowledge levels of the learners, nor is it grounded in early learning theories. The Namibian classrooms consist of a heterogeneous group of learners, and the majority of the observed teachers reported they do not feel equipped with the right skills to address the different learning levels. Whole-class instruction, a “one-size-fits-for-all” approach in which large groups of learners are managed without any adjustment to individual learning needs, was observed as a constant in the classrooms, making it challenging to attend to the different learning levels of the learners.

In their eagerness of attempting to follow the curriculum, teachers are observed to put efforts into delivering their predefined lesson structure with the least possible interruptions to this. The issue of evaluating learners’ progress through formative assessment strategies rarely occurs during instruction. As long as the lesson is delivered as planned and the learners can follow instructions and respond as a group, lesson objectives are believed to be achieved. Learner contributions consist mostly of choral responses or answering knowledge level questions.

“Teaching strategies ought to facilitate learning by the learners. Teaching for learning seems to be a problem. Teachers seem to focus more on the subject matter and the curriculum which they have to complete. They therefore use basic teaching methods to cover the subject matter. Even the teaching aids are limited to the basics such as chalkboard and teacher talk.”

“Instruction did not recognize the diversity among the learners; learners were instructed as if they were all on the same cognitive level, and had the same skills and experiences. Able learners, who finished their work quickly, spent a lot of time waiting for the teacher to assist the other learners in finishing their work.”

“From the observations, it was evident that the classes include learners at different levels of pre-reading and pre-mathematics skills. However, this is not considered in the lesson design to divide learners into level groups, utilize peer teaching or providing individual attention.”
Questioning strategies

Questioning strategies in 28 schools
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The lack of questioning practices to encourage learning is observed by the researchers as one of the most significant gaps in the 56 case-study classrooms, both related to teachers asking questions as well as learners asking questions. It seems however that from a teacher-centered perspective the lesson objective is perceived to be achieved when learners sit quietly and refrain from asking questions or questioning the theories and/or concepts raised. Teachers reflected to interpret any disturbance to that pattern as misbehavior of learners. Since learners are not encouraged to discuss, ask questions or speak up, their problem-solving and critical thinking skills are not well-developed.

If and when questions are asked by the teachers, they are from the lowest level of Bloom’s taxonomy (knowledge). Little feedback is provided to learner responses. Teachers were observed to either just ignore wrong answers by appointing the next learner to try, or to simply indicate that the answer is wrong while providing them with the right answer. There were few attempts to help learners understand why the answer was wrong. Helping learners to rectify their own mistakes is more important than just providing them with the correct answers, as learners are assisted to identify their own misconceptions.

“Overall, questions are asked regularly, but not in a way that learners can have initiative to expand their responses. Learners simply respond to the questions, but do not express themselves further. In general, learners are not encouraged to ask questions. They are not given an opportunity to do this. Questions were also mostly of low-order thinking level.”

“It was observed that the questions came from the teachers’ side only. Learners were not given the opportunity to ask questions. When asked to why learners were not given the opportunity to ask questions, the teachers explained that even if they are given the opportunity, they do not ask questions.”

There were a few classrooms where teachers varied their questioning techniques and encouraged learners to interact with each other and to provide explanations for their response. The following quote represents how this appeared in the classroom.

“The questions the teachers asked were informed by the lesson objectives and were much focused and challenging. Challenging in the sense that they needed learners to think. They were preparing the questions taking into account the developmental levels of the learners. If learners answered the questions wrongly, the teachers took time to correct them.”

Self-reflection

Self-reflection in 28 schools
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As part of the research data collection, teachers were requested to complete reflections, which examined lesson effectiveness, focusing on teaching strategies, challenges, and the level of learning of their learners. In most cases however, when teachers completed their reflections, they lacked substance and depth and did not provide explanatory descriptions of their teaching and its relationship to learning. The majority of the teachers did not describe how self-reflection informs their teaching practice. Journal entries did not match the expectations of the research project and did not reflect what was happening in the classroom. The overall impression was that everything went well, with no evidence to support these claims. When teachers felt that learning had not occurred they attributed this to mostly external factors such as cognitive levels of learners, misbehavior, absenteeism or lack of parental involvement.

The following quote reflects the reality of almost every report.

“Getting the teachers to complete the journals was quite a challenge.”

“It was obvious from the research that the teachers hardly reflect on their practices and learning circumstances and do not feel at ease with it. Even though teachers committed themselves to self-reflection exercises during the research process, the content of their learning journals was rather superficial and in some instances irrelevant. Most of the issues reflected were concerned about external factors which were used as a justification for “weaknesses in teaching and learning”, rather than personal and internal reflections on skills and capacities.”

The following quote is an isolated statement that reflects how a teacher used self-reflection to support instruction.

“Mostly she tries to make her lessons better by suggesting alternative ways of doing what she has done. When it comes to learners, she gives more attention to those who need it. She also reflects on the fact that to teach some concepts in maths, her mother tongue causes problems since the words tall and short and long and short are almost the same in Oshikwanyama.”

**Summary points of teachers’ capacity**

- Limited conceptual and pedagogical knowledge
- Limited range of teaching strategies
- ‘One size fits for all’ instructional method
- Limited range of questioning strategies
- Minimal self-reflection to inform practice

**Resources**

**Resources availability in 28 schools**

| + | + | - | - | + | + | - | - | - | + | + | - | - | - | - | + | + | - | - | - |

**Resources in mother tongues in 28 schools**

| - | - | - | + | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | + | - | - | - | - | - | - | + | - | - | - |

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The availability of sufficient resources for teaching and learning is a real concern. The lack of teaching materials in the mother tongues proved to be crosscutting throughout all case-study schools.

The lack of printed workbooks is a real issue, because it results in a vast amount of copying practices in the classrooms, as learners spend a lot of time copying assignments. The books used are all in English (and occasionally in Afrikaans), meaning that teachers try to ‘translate’ to the mother tongues while teaching. In many instances, meanings get lost in the process.

ICT availability and utilization is another concern in this regard; although more the latter than the former, as many case-study schools have all the necessary facilities in place without them being properly used to enhance teaching and learning. Many schools have computers and even internet access, though teachers do not seem to make use of this to prepare classes or as a teaching aid. Through the project, tablets were distributed to all case-study schools, to advance the integration of technology in the Namibian classrooms. For many of the teachers, this was a foreign tool, which they did not know how to handle and which they were afraid to break. Others started experimenting with enthusiasm and managed to integrate the device in the classroom practices.

A lack of resources is however not prevalent in all schools, as many do possess a great variety of teaching and learning materials. This does not mean that teachers always use them. Several reports commented on materials remaining in boxes or shelves and never being utilized for learning.

“The school is very well-provided with all materials necessary to facilitate quality teaching. Each of the 2 classes observed had their own storage room full of teaching aids. Having those materials in place however, does not mean that teachers always know how to use them optimally, on the contrary.”

“It was discovered that there was an acute shortage of both teaching and learning materials. The school did not have enough workbooks for learners, and learners had to share materials. Moreover books they used were all in English, and nothing in the mother tongue. The teachers, the grade 1 teacher in particular, struggled to translate grade 1 materials from English to mother tongue, and when she failed, she taught words in English. This had a detrimental effect on effective teaching and learning.”

“The school has a classroom with computers donated by charity people and organizations. The equipment still needed to be put to use as they remained covered and out of use.”

(summary points of resources)

- Limited resources for learning
- Limited resources in mother tongue
- Limited ICT availability and utilization to enhance teaching and learning
Support structures

Challenges are reported to be faced regarding the support structures in place. Teachers discussed different aspects that supported or detracted from their teaching.

Parental involvement is severely lacking in the Namibian education system. Parents are reported to have little interest in their children’s learning, although that issue obviously touches deeper than ‘interest’ as such. Many parents are illiterate or do not speak the teaching language, making them uncomfortable of being actively involved in their children’s learning.

Some schools report to receive sufficient support from the advisory teachers in their district, although others find these structures’ presence substantially lacking. This seems to be an issue very dependent on the region and district.

As for school managers and colleagues, the case-studies are also divided. Some teachers report to be very well supported by the principal and the other teachers in the school, while others cannot rely on their expertise. Many principals were found to be absent during the research.

“According to the teachers, parents especially those whose children are not performing well do not participate actively in such feedback opportunities initiated by the school; neither do they come to school when invited individually. Thereby the support received from home is very little to make a meaningful contribution to school performance of the learners who are struggling to achieve the required basic competencies.”

“Teachers expressed that they lack and desire collegial cooperation as well as support from the regional education officials.”

“The school is part of a cluster where teachers from different schools in the region exchange ideas that help to enhance learning.”

Summary points of support structures

- Limited parental involvement
- Varied support of regional structures
- Varied support of school management and collegial cooperation

Assessment

Assessment practices during instruction in the Namibian pre and lower primary classrooms are very limited. Overall, the research shows a substantial lack of individual support and follow up, meaning that feedback in general, and corrective feedback more specifically, is rarely provided. Teachers do not continuously monitor learners’ progress to inform teaching and learning.

When assessment is done on a regular basis, it seems to be of a fairly superficial nature. Choral response is often viewed as a way of assessing and monitoring learning and understanding. Little remedial action is taken when teachers assess and have opportunities to follow up on assessment results. Knowledge gaps may have been identified, though providing remediation was rarely observed.
“The Grade 1 teacher pointed out that in addition to the continuous assessment that would provide information on the progress of the individual learners over a long period of time. The continuous assessment template provides a good monitoring tool of learners’ work. However, there are little meaningful remedial actions taken by the teacher even if a learner has performed poorly for a long period of time.”

“Completed activities of all children are checked by the teacher and marked (5/5). However, opportunity for the child to receive individual feedback regarding the progress made towards the learning objectives is not provided. There are no standardized bases for the teacher to make a judgment of how the child is developing basic numeracy and literacy skills.”

“There were occasions when the teacher didn’t pick up on learner mistakes in a timely manner to help correct errors. For example, one left-handed learner wrote her name in a complete mirror image for 6 rows without the teacher attempting to correct the mistake.”

♀ Summary points of assessment

- Limited monitoring of learners’ competencies
- Few occasions where assessment informed instruction

System

The systemic aspects that have been identified as challenges throughout this research are twofold; issues regarding the medium of instruction on the one hand and curriculum related issues on the other hand.

According to the language policy for schools in Namibia, pre- and lower primary learners should be taught in their mother tongues, provided that the mother tongue is one of the 12 languages recognized as languages of instruction. For reasons such as unavailability of teachers in certain mother tongues and heterogeneous classrooms, this policy is not always followed, resulting in multiple factors affecting instructional delivery. Many learners are taught in one or more languages that are foreign to them, affecting understanding and conceptual development. Teachers are confronted with classrooms consisting of learners from different linguistic backgrounds, forcing them to code switch between languages to enhance understanding. The latter can obviously only be done if the teacher is capable of speaking learners’ languages. Especially with regards to the San communities, this proves to be a challenge: non San-speaking teachers are confronted with a majority of San-speaking learners, inevitably impacting the ability to access education.

Regarding the curriculum, multiple concerns are raised about its relevance and contextualization to the learning environment. Questions are raised about the content priorities and the relevant connections to learners’ everyday life. The little distinction between the pre-primary and Grade 1 curriculum is another issue of concern, as there is substantial overlap. Curriculum-related issues are something however, of which this research report can make little solid statements, since in-depth research on the curriculum document has not been done. Nevertheless, because teachers and researchers discuss this as an issue, the report wants to raise awareness for the matter and recommend further research.
“Still another serious challenge observed was on language. Language acted as a barrier since the curricula materials are in English. Expectation is that the teacher adheres to the language policy and the teacher is expected to translate everything. This comes with a lot of errors one associated with linguistic translation and two on issues related to cultural translation.”

“Learners come from different backgrounds and different mother tongues. Most of the learners speak Ju’hoansi but teachers lack fluent knowledge of this language, meaning that mother tongue education is not an option. Teachers address this issue mainly by using English as language of instruction, with code switching to Afrikaans and Khoekhoe-gowab when needed and possible. This lack of enforcement of the mother tongue policy in education causes significant learning challenges for the learners, complicating the cognitive heterogeneity of the class.”

“The medium of instruction is Oshikwanyama and she is Oshindonga speaking, so she tries to speak Oshikwanyama in class. The fact is that learners’ home language is as varied as the different dialects of Oshiwambo language. There is at least 1 Angolan child whose mother tongue is Portuguese.”

 ucfirst(“Summary points of system related aspects

- Language of instruction does not match mother tongue
- Concerns related to curriculum and classroom context

Numeracy

In terms of numeracy education in the 28 case-study schools, multiple issues were observed and reported on, of which the great lack of teachers’ conceptual knowledge related to numeracy instruction is central. Abstract concepts are taught without concrete examples or relevant contextualization. This follows teachers’ limited understanding of how to teach mathematical concepts and results in improper use of the available materials and teaching aids. The skills and procedures that are taught are disconnected from the concept development, meaning that learners know how to do certain things, without understanding why or what they are actually doing. Bringing the procedures and concepts to learners’ everyday life to enhance their understanding was not observed in most of the lessons.

Problem-solving skills, as part of numeracy instruction, were observed infrequently. Very rarely were learners asked to analyse or solve problems. Learners were not encouraged to question existing solutions, or to think about alternative solutions.

“The classroom had materials that can be used for a number of activities and projects. In a Grade 1 lesson, there was an activity that learners queued up to go to the shop and buy stuff. Learners were actively involved as one asked how much is the tooth paste and the learner who was selling answered: It is 1 NAD. And the learner gave a dollar and walked away.”
“A major issue concerning the lack of quality in numeracy education is teachers’ limited understanding of mathematical concepts. Teachers need to be able to present ideas to learners in a logical way that leads the learners step by step from concepts they understand to the understanding of new concepts. Teachers were observed presenting mathematical concepts wrongly, which simply confused the learners. Teachers were observed following up original examples with further examples that were of a substantially different kind, which failed to reinforce the concept taught and were confusing.”

“There is a serious lack of questioning and problem solving strategies in numeracy education. Children are not encouraged to think about alternative solutions, question the existing solutions or generally, are not given interesting and challenging questions. Teachers were often observed providing an explanation and then attempting to evaluate learners’ understanding by simply asking “Do you understand?”. The inevitable chorus of “YES” proves nothing.”

**Summary points of numeracy**
- Skills and procedures prioritized, rather than conceptual understanding
- Limited depth of pedagogical and content knowledge
- Abstract concepts explained without concrete examples
- Insufficient individual application time

**Literacy**

The challenges identified in the teaching of literacy reflect the overall lack of a reading culture in the country. The researchers observed very little reading of books or storytelling in the 56 pre- and lower primary classrooms. Traditionally, Namibian languages are rooted in an oral tradition rather than a written one. Researchers did not observe behaviours that attempted to promote a reading culture. The availability of relevant, age-appropriate and African language reading materials contributes greatly to the limited practices of reading in the classroom. In general, very few books are present in the classrooms and if present, they are not utilized. Libraries are either not in place, or in place but not used as proper libraries. The library concept of frequent visits to select, check out and return books is foreign.

Regarding the actual practice of writing as a form of communication, learners’ skills are reported to be poorly developed. There are limited opportunities for writing to communicate ideas. Regarding handwriting, insufficient materials are in place for learners to practice their letter and word formation. There were some Grade 1 learners who still struggled to write their names. However in other cases the handwriting of learners was well developed and they could copy large amounts of text from the writing board within one lesson period.

“Literacy was taught effectively using phonics. The teacher placed so much emphasis on phonics that in the end, most of the learners were able to read and write words correctly. The teacher kept referring learners to examples displayed at the back of the classroom.”

“In literacy lessons, the teacher usually starts by reading or telling a story and asking questions related to the story. Learners were expected to relate the story to something similar they have either at home or in their communities.”
“During literacy instruction, there is a focus on phonics but we did not observe strategies to develop phonemic awareness among the young children. When there were reading lessons, there was a lot of repetition from the learners and so it was difficult to know if they were actually reading, or repeating and memorizing the text.”

“Reading is not part of every day school practices. In fact, no book was read in any of the schools observed. Children themselves said they love folk stories, but at school they just read “words”.”

✿ Summary points of literacy

- Limited reading culture
- Few age-appropriate and relevant reading materials
- Lack of library concepts
- Significant gap between reading and writing – poorly developed writing skills
- Insufficient opportunities for writing legibly and to communicate

Pre-primary

The researchers made different comments on the observation of pre-primary education. In many schools, the pre-primary teacher was appropriately caring and warm and on occasions, education was observed to be adapted to the young age of the learners, with carpets and play areas in place.

However, many research teams reported very little activity-based learning and limited play structures in place. This reflects a learning environment not sufficiently conducive for the youngest learners. The instruction is reported to be insufficiently adapted to the young age of the learners, with the focus being too theoretical and academic, leaving little room for exploration and individual expression. Related to the young age of the learners, language barriers are, even more than in Grade 1, reported to be impediments towards effective teaching; some learners are observed to be unable to follow.

“In the pre-primary classroom, learners were very happy during story time and looked forward to the activity. Learners who gave correct responses were acknowledged with clapping hands. They were also discouraged to make fun of one another especially the ones who gave wrong responses. The teacher is the only one who spoke most of the time, the learners enjoyed the experience as the teacher told the stories with enthusiasm and demonstration.”

“The findings indicate that especially in the pre-primary classes, teachers actively encourage a sense of togetherness and caring for one another. As pre-primary teachers are often younger than Grade 1 teachers, they are more willing to position themselves towards the learners by sitting on the carpet with them and attending to the children’s well-being holistically.”

“The school yard is not partitioned to accommodate younger learners from the older ones. No playing equipment or area is made available for the children in the school yard.”
“Instruction at the pre-primary phase has a strong structured academic focus. Learners spend most of their classroom time sitting in their chairs and completing worksheets. The instructional approach was formal, structured and teacher directed. There were few opportunities for learners to learn through play, exploration and discovery.”

**Summary points of pre-primary education**
- Limited activity-based teaching and learning
- Language barriers
- Limited play structures in place
- Limited preparatory reading activities

**Grade 1**

A significant observation in the Grade 1 classrooms is the compelling over-crowdedness, with sometimes as many as 60 learners in a single classroom. This very fact poses substantial challenges for the teachers, mainly in terms of providing individual attention and managing such big groups effectively.

Following the limited delivery of pre-primary education, many learners start Grade 1 without pre-primary experience, coming straight from a different environment. This enlarges the heterogeneous character of the Grade 1 classrooms, as the readiness for school instruction varies. Teachers do not feel equipped to address the range of learning needs among their learners.

Another observation made in multiple reports is the academic focus with limited contextualization and very little linkages towards learners’ everyday life and environment.

“Overcrowded classrooms in Grade 1 were a very big challenge for the teacher because she cannot reach all the learners and give them the individualized attention that they need.”

“In comparison to limited pre-primary classrooms, the biggest number of learners is in Grade 1, with a total of 11 classes and a maximum of 47 learners in one class. Managing such a high number of learners compromises the quality and puts a lot of pressure on the teachers, especially if learners have not had the chance to participate in pre-primary.”

**Summary points of Grade 1**
- Many learners start Grade 1 without pre-primary experience
- Little contextualization or linkage with learners’ environment
- Overcrowded classrooms pose significant challenges regarding the provision of individual attention and effective classroom management
- Limited mother tongue instruction

**Strategies for intervention**

Informed by the abovementioned challenges, this report proposes a range of intervention strategies, as an attempt to improve quality education provision in the Namibian classrooms, both on the actual classroom practices’ level and the institutional level. The underlying idea however is to propose intervention with only the minimum of interruptions regarding educators’ presence in the
classrooms. The strategies were discussed and agreed upon with key researchers and stakeholders during the 2014 national consultative meeting.

**Interventions on the classroom/institutional level**

Action Research Part II will implement interventions that were generated after the completion of the initial research. Research teams have observed, collected data, described and analysed what they saw, and during the 2014 national consultative meeting, the researchers identified areas of particular challenge. The intervention piece will take place now that the research has generated a better understanding of classroom practices occurring in the 56 classrooms.

Five main areas particularly challenging in the Namibian pre- and lower primary classrooms have been identified: (1) Questioning strategies, (2) Effective use of teaching aids (especially in numeracy), (3) Story reading, (4) Management of the learning environment and (5) Formative assessment. All five areas require improvement and therefore a toolkit of strategies intended to elevate practices will be developed. The toolkit will contain strategies to improve the practice of the identified areas in the classroom (materials, books, specific teaching aids, written up guidelines, ideas etc). This toolkit, with infusion of ICTs and developmentally and culturally appropriate practices, that also address inclusive education, will be distributed to all 28 case study schools (and gradually to more schools in the future). The research teams will revisit the schools beginning of 2015 with the toolkit of strategies. The teachers in the schools, valuable members of the research teams, will choose which area they believe to be in need of urgent improvement in their classrooms. For one research week, the teacher will implement the chosen intervention strategy. The research team will observe, support and provide feedback to continue the action research during this intervention phase. Finally, after some time has passed, the team will go back one last time to evaluate the consistency of use and the impact on classroom teaching.

This implementation strategy for intervention stands as a continuation of the inter-institutional collaborative lecturer-teacher action research, seeking to strengthen teachers’ and lecturers’ self-reflection while empowering them to transform their practice.

**Interventions at the researchers’ level**

To strengthen the research skills of the institutions, the following initiatives were proposed and agreed upon. Training on action research with orientation to junior primary practices will be organized before the research teams will go back out into the classrooms for Action Research Part II. The UNAM lecturers of the junior primary department of the Faculty of Education will be guided in conducting regular action research on their own teaching practices.

On a regular basis, UNAM’s Continuous Professional Development Unit will organize workshops on publishing as a way of strengthening collegial interactions to produce written publications of their work. On that same note, an annual research calendar will be developed and implemented, in which discussions and dialogues on various issues will be organized in a pre-set annual timeframe. These will occur on all campuses or through virtual platforms and/or video conferences. This will strengthen collegial interactions and cooperation, while reinforcing a research culture within the academic community.
Literacy/numeracy specific interventions

To impact the quality of literacy and numeracy teaching in particular, the following specific initiatives are proposed. Regarding literacy, the Namibian Institute for Educational Development (NIED) has recently developed a teachers’ manual on teaching reading and writing in the junior primary grades. This manual builds on a number of policy documents, curricular changes and assessments in Namibia. The manual is a comprehensive document, taking the junior primary teacher step by step through the different aspects of teaching reading and writing. The proposed intervention is to develop this existing manual into an in-service course which can be delivered through the UNAM CPD Unit. It will at the same time also be aligned with the UNAM teaching curriculum of the faculty of education.

Regarding numeracy, the understanding of numeracy concepts stands as a significant challenge. The project will therefore develop an instructional manual to provide assistance in the teaching of numeracy concepts in the early grades.

ICT specific interventions

In order to integrate ICTs into the teaching and learning practices in Namibia, the abovementioned toolkit of strategies will be infused with technology, while educators will also be trained on material development with integration of ICTs. ICT based educational games will be introduced in the classrooms. Activities of video making with learners, teachers and community members are also proposed. These will focus on story writing and digital storytelling.

Interventions regarding support structures

In terms of strengthening support structures, participants at the 2014 national consultative meeting initiated multiple recommendations. It was proposed to work more on aspects of family literacy through the MoE directorate of adult education and to specifically enhance parental involvement through opportunities to include parents in classroom activities that align with their experiences and culture. Regional CPD coordinating structures will be strengthened towards being more engaged in offering professional development opportunities for teachers in the different regions. Finally, platforms that allow the sharing of practices and expertise amongst the different institutions (UNAM, MoE, UNESCO) will be established and activated. Sharing of practices will enhance the delivery of quality education in the early grades and beyond.

Virtual forum

A sustainable virtual forum for Namibian lower primary teachers, lecturers and other stakeholders is currently being established. It will promote a learning community of practitioners to facilitate discussion and communication amongst key stakeholders in the field of early childhood and lower primary education in Namibia. The forum will be facilitated by a rotating system of moderators, consisting of personnel from NIED, CPD and the five UNAM campuses; the facilitators will initiate discussions on various topics related to the particular field. The created virtual space will serve as a support system as well as an arena for cultivating and promoting new and innovative ideas; it will also serve as a storage room for available learning materials for literacy and numeracy acquisition. This way, all educators will have easy access to materials and ideas.
Conclusion

The UNESCO Chinese Funds-in-Trust project provided a platform to bring together UNAM Faculty of Education, classroom teachers, and other stakeholders to engage in an action research process. The initiative aimed at capacity building, supporting the merging of theory and practice, and building foundational knowledge of current practices as a baseline for designing meaningful interventions. Conclusions from the three-stage analysis process (school, regional, and national) address capacity for improving pre- and lower primary education from a teacher education and a classroom perspective.

In examining the data regarding teacher education which reflects the capacity of researchers, it is clear that many researchers found the collaborative process energizing and beneficial to understanding more deeply the connections between theory and practice. Some researchers felt challenged by the time and writing demands of the project. The reports illuminate various strengths and capacities of the researchers. Recognition of the various skills among faculty provides a window of opportunity to rely on specific strengths when collaborating with colleagues in the field. Furthermore, this research reinforces the value of this type of collaborative initiative and demonstrates the importance of making time for field based research to become integral to professional practice.

The data from a teacher perspective reveal that the majority of teacher participants connect with their learners and are passionate about their work with young children. They care deeply about supporting learners and providing meaningful relevant education but are not equipped with the skills and background to facilitate deeper learning at a foundational level in literacy and numeracy.

Emerging from the research process and data is the development of a common understanding related to quality education at the pre- and lower primary levels in the Namibian context. Throughout the research process, teams spoke and wrote about quality issues related to teaching and learning in the context of their case-study school settings. During regional and national consultative meetings, participants alluded to quality teaching based on individual perspectives and experiences. These multiple perspectives related to quality often overlapped and began to merge as a shared understanding of quality education at the lower primary grades in the Namibian context.

Capitalizing on the momentum generated during this research process, it is important to move forward to strengthen classroom practices and the use of research to inform teaching and learning. This will contribute to Namibia’s efforts in accelerating the progress towards the attainment of quality Education for All and the education-related Millennium Development Goals.