

# Home Environmental Factors Influencing Performance and Progress of Primary School Pupils in Windhoek

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## Abstract

*Low educational outcome is a problem in Namibia. This might be explained as a function of several factors such as socioeconomic background, child input and school internal factors. These factors must all be taken into consideration to explain why children do not fulfil basic education and attain low learning outcomes. Without disregard of the numerous school and child internal factors for low school performance, this study focused on the learners socioeconomic background and home language and to what extent these factors may encourage or discourage school progress and performance among learners in Windhoek, Namibia. Our findings support other studies which found that parents' educational level and income level have a bearing on school progress and performance. Contrary to most research findings mother tongue instruction did not emerge as an important explanatory factor on school progress and performance, however, home language did play a role.*

**Key words:** Primary education, language of instruction, socioeconomic background, Namibia

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## Introduction

Without disregard of the numerous school and child internal factors for low school performance, this study investigated how factors such as learners' socioeconomic background, language of instruction and home language may influence school progress and performance among learners in Windhoek, Namibia. Although numerous studies have confirmed socio-economic background as a major indicator for educational attainment (Al-Samarrai & Zaman, 2002; Arunatliake, 2004; Avila & Gasperini, 2005; Bolstad Jensen, 2000; Colclough, Al-Samarrai, Rose & Tembon, 2003; Fransoo, Ward, Wilson, Brownel, & Roos, 2005; Winger, 2003), the researchers were interested to find out to what extent this factor played a role within the Namibian urban context. Similarly, numerous studies have been conducted on the relationship between mother tongue instruction and school performance, but the literature reveals contradictory findings regarding this issue and the researchers were thus interested to add to this knowledge base in their research (Bamghose, 1991; Cummins, 2000; Murray, 2007; Ramasamy, 2001; Rivera, 1990; Wolfaardt, 2004). However, information on the relationship between home language and school performance is very limited. Namibia, with its multi-lingual society, provided the ideal situation to conduct a study in order to address this research gap, at least within the Namibian context.

The literature background for this paper gives a perspective on some of the factors that may affect educational attainment. It also includes a discussion on the challenges in the Namibian education system. The second part of the paper explains the research methods used for the study, followed by a presentation of the research results. The final part of the paper contains the conclusions based on the research findings.

## **Some Factors Affecting Educational Attainment**

Education for All and specifically universal primary education is an aim embedded in both human rights and developmental objectives, and is one of the Millennium goals for Africa (Dale, 1982; Government of the Republic of Namibia, 2004; Narmann, 1998; UNDP, 2003). Thus, for most African countries, primary education for all becomes a pillar in their development policy after the attainment of independence. Yet, more than 110 million children still never go to school or dropout, and low learning outcomes remain a widespread problem internationally.

Many studies support the view that family background is the strongest single predictor of educational outcomes. The common discourse is therefore that the reasons for non-participation, slow progress, drop-out, and low learning outcomes can mainly be found in the socio-economic character of learners' households (Al-Samarrai & Zaman, 2002; Arunatliake, 2004; Avila & Gasperini, 2005; Bolstad Jensen, 2000; Colelough, et al., 2003; Fransoo, et al., 2005; Winger, 2003). Results from a study in Botswana showed that schools with higher rates of poverty achieved poorer results on average (Wikan 2004; Zuze, 2010). Zuze (2010) also notes that students from less favourable home environments face greater academic challenges due to factors such as added demands on their time and less adult academic support. Fransoo et al. (2005) explains that although this relationship is not deterministic, the overall trend is clear and its influence powerful. There is also ample evidence to show that persons with higher levels of education stand a better chance to find employment and to be in jobs with higher income categories and thus to be better off economically (Gaomab, 2007; Government of the Republic of Namibia, 2007; United States Department of Labour, 2010). The educational level of parents can thus also have a bearing on learners' performance (Gravaas, Hægeland, Kirkeboen and Steffensen,

2008; Martins & Veiga, 2010). Furthermore, it is documented that children from well-connected families are likely to receive preferential treatment in schools and in this way the external social hierarchies are replicated in the school setting (Zuze, 2008). It also seems that irrespective of a country's economic circumstances, unsupportive home environments will inevitably interfere with scholastic development (Zuze, 2010).

An alternative explanation for low performance and progress is lack of quality and relevance of the school system (Dale, 1982). There is modest evidence indicating that students attending well-resourced schools are likely to perform better, irrespective of their background. A positive relationship has been found between the quality and quantity of school resources and pupil performance (Colclough et. al, 2003; Zuze, 2010). On a national level, quality deficiencies in schools, such as lack of school books, inadequate housing for pupils and teachers, and unqualified or under-qualified teachers are also linked to poverty. A poor state will struggle to provide access and quality education to all school aged children (Government of the Republic of Namibia, 2007).

A number of Southern African countries, such as South Africa, Zambia and Namibia, are characterised by a multicultural and multilingual population which further complicates and influences the quality of education. Extensive research by the Southern African Consortium of Educational Quality (SACMEC) showed that for most of the countries included in the research, the reading competence of the majority of learners fell far below the minimum level required for sufficient school progress and performance. It is also documented that the reading competence of pupils from lower socio-economic groups tends to be much lower than that of pupils from higher socio-economic groups (Makuwa, 2005).

Thus, a factor that might have a bearing on school performance is the language of instruction. There is strong support in the literature that those

pupils who are not taught in their mother tongue have more difficulties to master reading skills and to perform well in school (Harlech-Jones, 1998; Ramasamy, 2001; Rivera, 1990; Wolfaardt, 2004). This view is supported by Cummins (2000) who argues that a solid foundation in mother tongue results in learners being more confident at school which results in them experiencing more parental involvement in their learning. The latter, according to Cummins is triggered by the fact that both parents and teachers would be speaking the same language. Bilingual students' identities are also affirmed when they are encouraged to use their first language (mother tongue) writing abilities as a stepping stone or as a scaffold to writing in the second language (Cummings, 2011).

To the contrary some academics support the idea of direct introduction into the the language of wider communication or the official language of the country as a preferred method to home language instruction. This is also referred to as the 'maximum exposure hypothesis' or "time-on-task hypothesis" which states that the more time spent on learning a language the better a person will do in it (Cummins, 2003). Some parents, school authorities, and local politicians believe that there are greater benefits for children being taught through the language of wider communication. They want their children to start with this language as early as possible in order for them to perform better in the language, and because they believe more opportunities might exist in the language of wider communication (Bamgbose, 1991; Murray, 2007; Ramasamy, 2001). In a number of African counties the local languages compete with the official language or the language of wider communication, whether it is English, French or any other European language. For example in Botswana the main local language, Setswana, is spoken by the majority of the population, it is a language that is well developed and teachers are able to provide instruction in it, yet it is only offered as a subject in school, while English is the medium of instruction as

from the third grade (Molosiwa, 2005).

Educational outcomes can thus be explained as a function of several factors and there are interactions between background, child input and educational treatment factors. These factors must all be taken into consideration to explain why children do not fulfil basic education and attain low learning outcomes (Cummins, 1979; Colclough et.al., 2003). Although these factors are interlinked, their individual contribution to the complex situation of general low school performance should be investigated to come to a better understanding of the underlying challenges and to come up with possible intervention strategies and solutions. This paper focuses on how learners' socioeconomic and language background may influence their school progress and performance. However, in order to come to a better understanding of the influence of these factors on educational attainment, a brief analysis of major challenges in the Namibian educational system serves as part of the background for the survey in Windhoek.

### **Challenges in the Namibian Education System**

Although access to quality education remains a top priority of the education policy in Namibia, the education system continues to encounter several problems (Mostert & Wikan, 2008; Wikan, Mostert, Danbolt, Nes, Nyathi, & Hengari, 2007). Inequalities in education persist despite efforts to eradicate them and these are evident in the distribution of access, learning outcomes and resource inputs (Marope, 2005). While a small percentage of privileged children enjoy a high standard of education, the majority of children in Namibia do not receive an education of such quality. Research indicates that high expenditure on education has not translated into a corresponding improvement in learner outcomes (Government of the Republic of Namibia, 2004).

Drop out, repetition, and low learning outcomes are common characteristics

of the Namibian school system. Although non-enrollment for lower primary education is relatively low in Namibia, drop-out rates to subsequent phases remain high. School enrollment statistics show that of the total enrollment of 577,290 learners in 2008, 42 percent were in the lower primary phase, 29 percent in the upper primary phase and 23 percent in the junior secondary phase. A meager 6 percent survived to be enrolled in the senior secondary phase. These enrolment figures are a clear indication that large numbers of learners are finding it difficult to remain in school after the lower primary phase. Repetition rates between 2007 and 2008 also remained high. During this period it was the highest for grade 8 at 25%, followed by grade 5, at 23%, and for grade one it was 21% (Ministry of Education, 2008). Low learning outcome is also a serious problem in Namibian schools. For example, for the 2007 junior secondary national examination the symbols for the main six subjects (those with the highest enrolments) were mostly D, E and F. All six subjects faired below D on average.

Even though the reasons for dropping out, repetition and low performance have not fully been investigated, indications are that socioeconomic factors such as poverty and hunger play a key role. Due to low educational levels of parents and high unemployment rates a large number of households are economically severely disadvantaged (Gaomab, 2007; Government of the Republic of Namibia, 2007; Mostert, 2003), and based on research evidence, these factors can be expected to have a negative impact on academic progress and performance. In a study including schools in Windhoek, Möwes (2004) found that large classes, lack of learning material, low student performance and low parental involvement causes stress and low performance of learners. Namibia is a multilingual and culturally diverse country. There are 13 indigenous languages, all of which are presently regarded as equal, regardless of the number of speakers or the level of development of a

particular language. Over 54% of learners in Namibia speak an Oshiwambo language at home. Other large numbers are Khoekhoegowab speakers (10%), Otjiherero (7%) and Afrikaans (6%). Less than 1% of learners speak English at home (Ministry of Education, 2008). After attaining independence from an Afrikaans language dominated South Africa in 1990, Namibia, through its constitution introduced English as its official language (Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1990; Article 3.1.). According to the language policy, the home languages are the preferred medium of instruction for grades one to three, after which English is phased in, in order to prepare learners for the secondary phase. In addition to this, English is a compulsory subject in all schools and also the medium of instruction as from grade four.

However, in practice, many classes have learners with different home languages and only one of these can be the medium of instruction. These language differences obviously complicate the task of educators especially in the first three grades, resulting in many pupils not being taught in their mother tongue in the formative years of education. According to national statistics there are quite large variations between the language groups with regard home-language instruction; for example of the English speaking pupils, 80% are taught in English, the figure for Oshiwambo is 64 %, for Afrikaans it is 63%, and for Khoekhoegowab 42%, (Ministry of Education, 2007). Heterogeneity in the class is often used as a reason for choosing English or sometimes Afrikaans as the medium of instruction, and as a result, after Oshindonga, English medium of instruction has the highest enrollment in the first three grades (Ministry of Education, 2007). A study by Trewby (2001) showed that even in a school where 71% of the pupils spoke Khoekhoegowab, English was used as the medium of instruction. He pointed out that the lack of teachers that speak and teach in the national languages may be a problem. Another argument used is neutrality, or the



notion not to choose any of the Namibian languages but rather English. Some parents may deliberately choose to place their children in English classes for grades one to three, based on the fact that English is the medium of instruction after grade three, the official language of the country and thus the language of wider communication. However English is a bad choice according to Trewby (2001) since its structure is very different from that of the Namibian languages and it is one of the more difficult languages to learn. Since less than one percent of the Namibian school population are English home language speakers, it can be expected that little English is spoken in most communities on the informal level, and pupils are exposed to English mainly in the classroom.

Due to the multilingual nature of Namibia, home language and the language of instruction can also be expected to play a role in school progress and performance. SACMEQ research clearly demonstrated that there are serious gaps in the reading competencies of pupils in the upper primary phase (Makuwa, 2005). For Namibia, all educational regions were included in the SACMEQ research and it was found that the majority of pupils did not reach the minimum mastery in reading English based on the criteria as was determined by the Namibian reading specialists. For example, it was found that at the overall national level only 16.9% of pupils reached the minimum level of mastery in reading literacy and a meagre 6.7 % reached the desirable level. By minimum level it is meant that the learner will barely survive the next year of schooling, and by desirable the likelihood of success is very high (Makuwa, 2005).

To sum up, quality education for all is far from fulfilled in Namibia and hence low performance and school dropout continues to affect pupils in the education system. School environmental factors, home environmental factors and also learner factors all contribute to this situation. There is a debate as to the extent that mother tongue instruction is necessary in order for

the child to do well. In the present study we focus on how learners' socioeconomic and language background may influence their school performance.

## **Methodology**

### *The study area*

The survey was done in selected areas of Windhoek, the capital of Namibia which is situated in the Khomas education region. This education region has 47 primary schools, 12 combined and 26 secondary schools. Whereas 60 schools are government schools, 25 are private schools. At the time of the study there were 40,773 learners in primary and 21,230 learners in secondary school. The average teacher learner ratio was 27.5, which is more or less the average for the country. Being the Capital and situated in central Namibia, Windhoek is characterized by a multi-cultural and multilingual population. There are also wide variations in the socioeconomic status of its inhabitants. According to the Ministry of Education overcrowded classrooms in the cities are due to the influx of learners from the rural areas and this has consequences for the provision of quality education (Ministry of Education, 2004/5).

### *Sample*

Using clustered sampling, a household survey was carried out on 120 households in four areas of Windhoek, Namibia. The settlement pattern in Windhoek is clearly stratified, mainly following income levels. Because one purpose of this study was to find out how the socioeconomic background of learners influences their progress and performance at school, we selected one very poor, one poor, one middleclass, and one wealthy area for the household interviews. For each area 30 households were selected. However, on closer investigation after data collection, it was realised that the very poor and poor areas were very similar and for the data analyses these two groups were

combined and thus consists of 60 households, referred to as poor. Only households with school aged children were chosen, using the snowball method. After conducting the first interview, the interviewer asked to be directed to the next household within the selected area which qualified. A disadvantage of this method is that households are not selected randomly. Thus we cannot claim that the households are representative for the households in the selected areas or for Windhoek as a whole. Therefore one should be careful not to generalise the research results or to draw firm conclusions from these. Nevertheless, despite the limitations, the findings of this study add to the information on those home-environmental factors which might have a bearing on progress and performance of learners at school.

### *Instruments*

The data was gathered using structured interviews. The questionnaire consisted of 3 sections. Section A sought biographical information about the learners and their socioeconomic background; section B focussed on school performance, work habits, and progress. Section C looked at parents' attitudes towards education. All information gathered from this research is thus based on parents' or the heads of the household's points of view. The terms *progress* and *performance* are operationalised as follows: Progress refers to the learners' progress from one grade to the other and thus the repetition of one or more grades will be an indicator of slow progress. "Doing well or not well in school" is considered the indicator of performance.

### *Data analyses*

The data was possessed and analysed using SPSS statistical package. Since the questionnaire contained few sensitive questions there was no reason to believe that the interviewees did not answer truthfully and thus we can claim that the data reflects high levels of reliability and validity.

## Findings

In this section we present some factors which might have a bearing on low performance. The findings showed that socio-economic background, parents' attitude, and home language had a bearing on the progress and performance of learners in school. However, before these findings are discussed, some of the prominent differences that were found with regard to the household areas (poor, middle class and well-off) are described.

### *Socio-economic characteristics of the households in the three areas*

As was expected, vast differences were found among the three areas with regard to factors associated with socio-economic status. A household's productive capacity depends on labour, land and capital. Labour can be measured as quantitative, for example total income, and qualitative, that can for instance be educational level (Wikan, 2004). Educational level seems to be an asset that determines level of living in most countries. Looking at the education level of parents in this study, the results showed that it was only in poor households where the head of the house had no school education (10%), only 13% had secondary education, and none had tertiary education. For the average income area 30% and 10% had secondary and tertiary education respectively while for the well-off these figures were 40% for both secondary and tertiary education. These findings were statistically significant ( $p < 0.00$ ). We thus see that poor households typically have lower educational levels than better-off households. Similarly, the employment status of the household heads differed significantly among the groups as identified. In poor households more than 90% were unemployed, did piecework or manual work. In contrast to this, the most typical employment for average households were manual and white collar jobs and 77% of heads in this group were employed in these occupation areas. In well-off households 87% of heads were employed in white collar or professional jobs ( $p < 0.00$ ).

In Namibia there is a large variation, even among government schools, in school fees paid and facilities that are available at schools. Total expenses for education in a household from the poor areas averaged 2,687 Namibian dollars, from the middle income areas 3,227 Namibian dollars and from the well-off areas, 13,300 Namibian dollars ( $p < 0.00$ ). The learners coming from households with low educational and employment levels thus typically belong to the poorer areas of Windhoek. As was seen from the literature (Zuzc, 2008; 2010), this might have a bearing on the quality of education they receive and subsequently on their school progress and performance.

### *Socio-economic status and school progress and performance*

In this section we report on how the socioeconomic status of the households influenced the school progress and performance of learners in this study. Our study support national figures which show that most children in Windhoek attend primary school. That is, nonattendance and dropout during primary school seems not to be the problem. Only 9% of all households reported dropout of one of their children and only one household admitted non enrollment. These figures are close to national figures on enrollment (Ministry of Education, 2008).

The problem seems to be lack of progress through the education system and forty percent of the households said that all or some of their children have repeated one or more grades. Based on our research results the area of living, and thus income levels of the household, clearly had a bearing on repetition. Children from households in the poorer areas repeated grades more often than those from better off areas (table 1).

Table 1: Repeated a grade by area in Windhoek. Percentage

|                 | Repeated | Not Repeated |
|-----------------|----------|--------------|
| Poor Area       | 53       | 47           |
| Middle Class    | 33       | 67           |
| Well of Area    | 20       | 80           |
| df = 2 p < 0.01 |          |              |

As previously shown, there is a close link between income level and education and therefore it was not surprising to find that those coming from households with higher educational levels were less likely to repeat grades (table 2).

Table 2: Have repeated by education level head of household. Percentage.

|                   | Repeated | Not repeated |
|-------------------|----------|--------------|
| Primary and less  | 46       | 54           |
| More than Primary | 31       | 69           |
| df = 1 p < 0.01   |          |              |

Socioeconomic status also seemed to influence parents' opinion of how well their children were doing in school. Whereas 76% of those from poorer areas reported that their children are doing well, the figure from the well-off area was 90% ( $p < 0.05$ ). When parents were asked if their children got a good education, 75% answered in the affirmative. So most parents do not seem to blame the schools for the lack of progress their children are making. Cross tabulation showed that substantially more parents from the well-off families (97%) were satisfied with their children's education than those from average families, where only 57% indicated satisfaction. Poor families fell between these two groups and 73% felt that their children got a good education ( $p < 0.01$ ). The level of education of parents also had an effect on parents' satisfaction with their children's education. With the exception of those with no education, there was a decrease in the satisfaction level of parents as the

educational level of parents decreased. For example all parents with tertiary education and 82% with secondary education were satisfied with their children' education while this was the case for 76% of those with primary and only 50% of those with some primary education ( $p < 0.01$ ).

### *Parents' attitude towards school and education*

A close relationship between home and school is considered to have a bearing on how well learners are doing in school (Cummins, 2000; Zuze, 2008; 2010). We looked at parents' attitude with regard to education and how that may influence progress and performance. We considered "help with homework"; if "parents have spoken to the teachers"; and "have been in their classrooms" as indicators of how much the parents are involved in the children's schooling. 82% of the parents claimed that they are helping their children with homework. This is higher than what is reported in a national study which found that 60% of the parents are making sure that the homework is done (SACMEC, 2005). This discrepancy may partly be explained due to the fact that the sample only included areas in one urban setting. Furthermore, 82% of household heads said that they have spoken to their children's teachers but only 58% have been inside their classrooms. Further data analyses revealed that the attitudes of parents also differed across income levels. While 100% of children from both average and well off areas received help with homework, this was the case for only 65% of those from poor households ( $p < 0.00$ ). It was also found that 67% of poor households had never been in their children's classrooms as opposed to 10% and 27% of average and well-off households respectively ( $p < 0.00$ ). It was interesting to note that quite a high percentage of well-off households' heads also had not been in their children's classrooms.

### *Home Language and Language of Instruction*

According to the language policy in Namibia, mother tongue education is

encouraged in grades 1 to 3, but another language of instruction – normally English – should be used if the parents recommended it. As many as 16 languages are regarded as possible media of instruction (Ministry of Education, 2008). English is introduced as a second language and the only medium of instruction as from grade 4. This policy is in accordance with much research which state that instruction in the mother tongue, during the first school grades, is essential in order to perform well (Harlech-Jones, 1998; Ramasamy, 2001; Rivera, 1990; Wolfaardt, 2004). Based on our results this practice was not in place. In total only 31% of the sampled learners received home language instruction during the first grades. Only English home language speakers were all taught in their home language. In fact, the majority of the other large language groups were also taught in English and not their own home language (table3).

Table 3: Language spoken at home versus language of instruction. Percentage.

| Home Language | Language of Instruction |           |           |         |            |
|---------------|-------------------------|-----------|-----------|---------|------------|
|               | English                 | Afrikaans | Oshiwambo | Khoegwb | Otjiherero |
| English       | 100                     |           |           |         |            |
| Afrikaans     | 79                      | 21        |           |         |            |
| Oshiwambo     | 66                      | 12        | 22        |         |            |
| Otjiherero    | 77                      | 8         | 8         |         | 8          |
| Khoekhoegowab | 50                      | 8         | 8         | 17      | 8          |

Home language did not seem to have a bearing on parents' perception of how well a child is performing in school. Yet our results showed that the language spoken in the family did influenced school progress, and grade repetitions were as high as 75% amongst Khoekhoegowab speakers followed by Oshiwambo (44%), Afrikaans (37%), Otjiherero (23%) and English (14%)



speakers ( $p = 0.05$ ).

On the other hand, the language of instruction and whether or not the child got instruction in his or her mother tongue did not yield any significant differences with regard to grade repetition.

## Conclusion

This research clearly indicated that socio-economic factors such as occupation and education of parents have a direct bearing on the progress and performance of learners in schools. More children from poorer households repeated grades or did not do well in school as compared to those from households that are better off. It was also found that more parents from the well-off households help their children with homework or visited their schools and classrooms, and their children are doing better in school. This finding thus support the hypothesis that children who are getting more and maybe better help at home have a better chance to perform better in school (Gravaas et al.,2008). On the other hand children coming from poorer households are getting less help and support with their school work. An explanation for this could be that parents who are themselves not highly educated or have low income jobs may feel insecure to assist their children with homework or to visit the school and the classrooms of their children (Caldas & Bankstone, 1997).

Contradictory to what the Namibian language policy prescribes, only 31% of the sampled learners received home language instruction during the first grades and the majority of learners were taught in English and not their own home language. We do not know the reasons for this and the issue may need further investigation. It might be the choice of the parents; lack of teachers to teach in the mother tongue, or even the choice of the school. National figures and other studies have also found that a high number of children are not being

taught in their mother tongue as is recommended by the Namibian language policy (Ministry of Education 2008; Treweby, 2001). Based on the findings from this report, grade repetition was not influenced either by the language of instruction or whether or not the child was instructed in the mother tongue during the initial grades. The results therefore neither support nor refute the maximum exposure hypothesis or the home language hypotheses and further research is needed on this issue. However, the language spoken at home did have a bearing on grade repetition and there were great differences between the language groups included in the sample. It may be that the transfer from the mother tongue to English may be more difficult for some of the Namibian languages as opposed to others and further research into this matter may shed some light on the reasons for this difference. Previous research and results from this study clearly shows that much is still to be learned before we can come to a clear understanding of how home language and language of instruction influences educational attainment. Countries with a multi-lingual character are influenced more negatively than those with a more monolingual character and language should thus be considered as a major factor that can influence school progress and performance.

It should be kept in mind that there is also a correlation between socioeconomic status and the quality of the education available to the child and therefore both these aspects may be the reason for the differences among the groups. Our research showed that parents in the better off areas pay more in school fees and thus probably have more choices with regard to where and how their children will be educated. Findings in this study may thus be mediated by factors related to the quality of teachers and schools.

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