



**Challenges and Opportunities of Teaching  
in Multilingual and Multicultural Education  
Contexts in Namibia**

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Email address: [tetflemanager@up.ac.za](mailto:tetflemanager@up.ac.za)

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# TETFLE TEACHER EDUCATION THROUGH FLEXIBLE LEARNING IN AFRICA


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## Challenges and Opportunities of Teaching in Multilingual and Multicultural Education Contexts in Namibia

### Anna Niitembu Hako

University of Namibia

**Email:** [ahako@unam.na](mailto:ahako@unam.na)  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6367-1969>

### Aili Nuusiku Kapolo

Kunene Directorate of Education

**Email:** [ailikapolo88@gmail.com](mailto:ailikapolo88@gmail.com)

### Petrus Dhiginina Shipalanga

Kunene Directorate of Education

**Email:** [pdshipalanga@gmail.com](mailto:pdshipalanga@gmail.com)

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## Abstract

This study investigated the challenges and benefits of teaching in Namibia's multilingual and multicultural educational contexts. A sample of 30 teachers was purposefully selected for the current study. The data were collected through focus group discussions and a self-administered questionnaire and analysed using a thematic data analysis method. The findings show that teachers have difficulties in serving learners from various cultures and languages, which creates challenges to inclusive learning settings. Although the teachers (participants) experienced difficulty in assessing learners' oral tasks, it emerged that their cultural awareness and language proficiency increased. The study emphasises the significance of a comprehensive training plan in multicultural learning programmes for developing cultural competency and preparing teachers for multilingual and multicultural settings.

**Keywords:** Distance learning; diverse cultures; inclusive education; Kunene region; learning environment; multicultural Language; multilingual.

## Introduction

Namibia is known for its linguistic richness, with numerous languages spoken in each of its 14 regions. While estimates vary greatly, it is largely acknowledged that Namibia has approximately 30 different spoken languages. However, some of these languages are more widely spoken than others. Namibia's most common languages are Oshiwambo (which includes several dialects such as Oshindonga and Oshikwanyama), Afrikaans, Damara/Nama, Khoekhoegowab (Nama/Damara), English (the official language), Otjiherero, RuKwangali, Silozi, and Setswana (Lusakalalu, 2007, as cited in Norro, 2024; Namibia Statistics Agency, 2012). These languages fall into several linguistic families, including Bantu, Khoisan, and Germanic. Furthermore, English, Afrikaans, German, and Portuguese are extensively spoken in trade, education, and administration, reflecting Namibia's colonial past and ongoing globalisation. Teaching learners from diverse linguistic backgrounds can be challenging, especially if the teachers are not proficient in the learner's vernacular. Namibia's adoption of an inclusive education policy that emphasises cultural and linguistic diversity shows a commitment to ensure that all learners, regardless of background or ability, have fair access to quality education (Republic of Namibia: Ministry of Education, 2013). The importance of including cultural and linguistic diversity in the educational system is highlighted in the "Sector policy on inclusive education" (Republic of Namibia: Ministry of Education, 2013).

The terms "multilingual" and "multicultural" are commonly used to describe diverse educational contexts in schools (Lauridsen & Lillemose, 2015, p. 9). According to Lauridsen and Lillemose (2015), multilingualism describes settings in which teachers and learners speak different first languages, none of which must correspond with the language of instruction. They also write that, in addition to linguistic diversity, the term 'multicultural' refers to the presence of many ethnic backgrounds (cultures) among learners and teachers. While individuals' cultural heritage can impact their customs, beliefs, and habits, as well as their language, despite their differences, they both teach and study in an academic environment. Understandably, the traditional nomadic lifestyle of the Otjiherero and Themba-speaking people of the Kunene region, where this study was conducted, may create further impediments to education. Because of their lifestyle needs, nomadic people are known to prioritise subsistence activities such as farming and herding over formal education (Ninkova, 2020). Historically, nomadic societies may have placed less emphasis on formal education since they rely



on traditional knowledge and skills to survive. This can result in low enrolments, high dropout rates, and a lack of community support for educational programmes.

While the study region is primarily made up of Otjiherero and Themba-speaking communities, English is the official language of instruction in Namibia. Namibia's language policy for schools: 1992-1996 and beyond, has evolved to satisfy a wide range of educational needs and objectives (Republic of Namibia: Ministry of Education, 2003). According to the language policy, the mother tongue is used as a medium of instruction (MoI) from pre-kindergarten to Grade 3, followed by English from Grade 4 to Grade 12. This policy seeks to create a balance between the promotion of indigenous languages and the importance of English proficiency, which is essential for higher education and job opportunities. In other words, during the early years of school (pre-kindergarten through Grade 3), learners are taught in their mother tongue or dominant language. This approach is in line with the established understanding in the literature that children learn best when taught in a language they fluently understand (Benson, 2019; Ninkova, 2020). It also aims to preserve and promote indigenous languages. From Grade 4, English becomes the primary medium of teaching for most of the courses, although indigenous languages are frequently taught as topics rather than as media. This shift intends to prepare learners for higher education, where English fluency is commonly required, as well as to equip them with the linguistic skills needed to participate in a globalised world.

Additionally, the Kunene region has 69 schools to provide for the population's educational needs. Most of the schools are state-run, and only six (6) are private schools. There are 43 primary schools, including 38 state-run and five (5) private schools. Secondary education is offered at seven well-established schools. These schools are staffed by a group of 1 187 dedicated teachers. Most teachers (1 113) have formal teacher training; however, 74 teachers do not have formal teacher training, yet they contribute valuable real-world experiences to instruction. The Kunene region has 837 permanent classrooms, 43 prefabricated structures, 108 ordinary classrooms, and 30 rental facilities (Education Management Information System, 2022). The diverse facilities ensure that educational opportunities are offered to a wider range of learners.

Moreover, when the Ministry of Education, Arts, and Culture (MoEAC) appoint teachers to schools, it assures that teachers from any of the 14 regions in Namibia are qualified to work in any region or school, if they meet the recruitment criteria (Office of the Prime Minister, 2012). However, when teachers from different cultural

backgrounds are hired in areas where prominent languages differ from their own, they tend to encounter linguistic barriers that might impair the teaching and learning process. This language barrier may limit effective communication between teachers and learners, and result in lower educational attainment levels. According to Fielding and Harbon (2013), teachers play a significant role in deciding languages to be used in the classroom, which has a direct impact on the learning process, outcomes, and identity development. Furthermore, teachers' perspectives and practices of language instruction have a notable impact on the educational landscape, since they play a vital role in promoting linguistic diversity, enabling inclusive learning environments and ultimately, increasing educational outcomes for all learners. Garcia and Kleyn (2016) emphasise that teachers' abilities should advocate for and create space for a multilingual approach, even within a framework that officially favours monolingualism. Equally important, acknowledging and respecting different cultural norms and practices are essential for building an inclusive learning environment, and teachers need cultural sensitivity training to avoid misunderstandings or confrontations. However, preparing teachers to teach effectively in multilingual and multicultural settings requires specialised training. This includes language acquisition strategies, culturally appropriate instructional approaches, and intercultural communication skills. Furthermore, the cost of teacher training, which is usually out of reach for many Namibians, poses a significant obstacle for both individuals and the government (Norro, 2022).

A considerable body of literature has been written about multicultural education and its implications. Researchers identified several challenges to adopting intercultural education (Hays & Ninkova, 2018; Moland, 2019; Ninkova, 2020). Their findings highlight a critical issue: teachers' alleged inability to teach successfully in diverse classrooms. This could be due to a lack of experience or resources for integrating multicultural perspectives into the curriculum. Furthermore, some teachers may be hesitant to be involved in multicultural education, because they find discussions about sensitive topics such as culture and identity uncomfortable or irrelevant. This opposition may impede on efforts to fully adopt and implement intercultural education initiatives in educational institutions.

Naz et al. (2023) stated that a lack of awareness of learners' cultural backgrounds can result in teachers unknowingly reinforcing stereotypes and engaging in microaggressions. For example, assuming that a second-language English learner is less proficient or smart than a native speaker may have detrimental implications.



Such preconceived notions can lead to lower expectations for academic performance, reducing the learner's chances of success. When teachers harbour these biases, they may unintentionally create barriers to learning, limiting the learner's ability to reach their full potential. Norro (2022) found that teachers were unprepared to teach in diverse classrooms and lacked the necessary resources to effectively incorporate multicultural education. Norro (2022) argued that learners also claimed that intercultural education had overburdened information access and found it hard to comprehend. Some teachers regard intercultural education as ineffective and difficult, since it addresses sensitive topics such as culture and identity. Furthermore, Norro (2022) suggests that teachers require greater assistance and training to promote and implement intercultural education in classrooms and provide learners with relevant materials and advice. These challenges have prompted several inventive and locally doable practices (Lauridsen & Lillemose, 2015).

Scholars have demonstrated that exposure to diverse cultures enhances the educational experience of both learners and teachers (Banks, 2009; Lauridsen & Lillemose, 2015; Reid & Major, 2017). The findings of these studies show the potential benefits of multicultural education in terms of increasing cultural understanding, empathy, and respect among learners, leading to increased diversity in educational environments. The studies also support the view that multicultural education boosts critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving abilities in the classroom, resulting in a more inclusive and intellectually challenging learning environment. Hence, exposing learners to diverse cultures and languages may allow them to challenge their assumptions and widen their viewpoints. This part of the educational process can lead to a greater awareness and appreciation for cultural differences as well as the ability to navigate and thrive in multicultural environments. In other words, multicultural classes present unique challenges and abundant opportunities for learning and intercultural competency. As such, both teachers and learners gain valuable skills, such as communication and autonomous learning, for personal and professional growth. Erling et al. (2017, as cited in Norro, 2022), stress that multilingual education strategies such as scaffolding and moulding improve learning and enable learners to maintain their multilingual identities, which is crucial in all postcolonial educational systems, including Namibia.

While there has been extensive research on multicultural origins in Western countries, Namibia has only conducted a few empirical investigations on the subject.

Ashikuti (2019) examined the implementation of Namibia's national language-in-education policy (LiEP) and found that the implementation of Namibia's LiEP in junior primary schools varies significantly between urban and rural settings, influenced by factors like linguistic variety, exposure to the MoI, and teaching resources. Basimike (2018) conducted a study on the use of the English language in multilingual communication and found that both individuals who exclusively interact in English and those who are bilingual in English and a local Namibian language continue to face challenges. Mensah (2015) examined the management of linguistic diversity in an international multilingual high school in Namibia. Mensah (2015) study proposed that, in subjects other than English, the use of languages other than the MoI should be promoted. This would help address the language and knowledge disparities among learners who have limited or no familiarity with the MoI.

The current study investigated the challenges and opportunities of teaching in Namibia's multicultural and multilingual educational context. The study seeks to attain the following research objectives:

- Identify the challenges that teachers experience when implementing multicultural and multilingual education in Namibian educational settings.
- Investigate the opportunities for teaching in multicultural and multilingual education in Namibian educational institutions.
- Recommend strategies for teachers to effectively implement multicultural and multilingual education in Namibian school environments

The study is organised as follows: first, the background and theoretical framework that support the study are presented. The next section explains the study's research methodologies and procedures. The results are then presented and the findings of the study are discussed. Finally, conclusions and future research directions are presented.

## Theoretical framework

The current study used the sociocultural theory as its theoretical underpinning, which was developed by Lev Vygotsky in the 1930s (Mahn & John-Steiner, 2012). This theory focuses on the importance of social contact and cultural context in cognitive growth and learning. In Namibia, where learners from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds come together in the classroom, this theory provides a complete framework for comprehending the complexity of teaching and learning. Language, according to the sociocultural theory, is not just a medium of communication, it is also



an instrument for thought and cultural mediation (Glăveanu, 2020). Understanding the relationship between language and cognition is especially important in a multilingual setting like Namibia, where learners may prefer to utilise their vernacular languages. In this way, teachers may have a better understanding of the significance of integrating learners' language and cultural backgrounds into the learning process and harnessing their prior knowledge and experiences to enable meaningful learning experiences.

The sociocultural theory emphasises the importance of social contact in learning (Glăveanu, 2020). Collaborative learning is vital in a multicultural classroom, as learners contribute different perspectives and cultural norms. Teachers can use peer contact to foster cross-cultural understanding, empathy, and cooperation, transforming cultural diversity issues into opportunities for richer educational experiences. Additionally, the sociocultural theory emphasises the teacher's function as a facilitator of learning within a sociocultural environment. Teachers are urged to use culturally responsive teaching approaches that acknowledge and value their learners' diverse backgrounds. Teachers can establish inclusive classrooms by supporting learning experiences that span learners' cultural and linguistic gaps. Finally, the sociocultural theory offers a comprehensive framework for studying the challenges and opportunities associated with teaching in Namibia's multilingual and multicultural educational system. Recognising the interdependence of language, culture, and learning enables teachers to manage the complexity of diverse classrooms and unlock the full potential of every learner.

## **Method**

### **Approach and design**

The current study used a qualitative research approach and case study research design, considering that the design offers numerous benefits for examining complicated phenomena such as multicultural education in remote regions like the Kunene region. The researchers could gain first-hand knowledge of how teachers in the Kunene region manage diverse classes and implement multicultural pedagogies within their contexts. That is, the researchers could explore the unique context of the Kunene region, resulting in thorough and contextually relevant data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This level of detail is critical for understanding the challenges, opportunities, and benefits of multicultural education, especially in remote areas like the Kunene

region where educational contexts significantly differ from those in urban settings; thus, it was designated as an information-rich site.

## Population and sample

The current study's population comprised 1 187 teachers from schools in the Kunene region. Purposive sampling was used to select a sample of 30 teachers, which comprised 20 female and 10 male teachers. The criteria selection was at least four years of teaching experience, within the age range of 25 to 50, and having lived in the Kunene region for at least five years. According to Creswell and Parson-Clark (2018), the purposive sampling approach is a non-probability sampling methodology in which participants are selected based on their expertise and relevance to the study objectives. This tailored method guarantees that the data acquired is rich and directly relevant to the study's aims, resulting in more meaningful and focused findings. Therefore, teachers who teach Grades 0-9 in remote areas, such as the Kunene region, were regarded experienced enough to provide valuable insights into the unique challenges and opportunities that come with such a setting. Such teachers are proficient in the phonics technique and have expertise in delivering supplementary instruction and learning support to learners who need more assistance.

## Data collection methods and instruments

Data were collected through focus group discussions and self-administered questionnaires. These methods were most fitting for the current study because of their ability to generate rich and informative data through group participation. To ensure a concentrated and uninterrupted environment, participant focus group discussions were held in the afternoon, once classes had ended. Due to the vastness and scattered nature of the area, focus groups were conducted with one group per day. However, measures were taken to ensure participant comfort and confidentiality. Participants were assured of anonymity, encouraged to be honest, and advised to share only their own knowledge and opinions.

To study the participants' explanations and experiences, focus group discussion protocols and a self-administered questionnaire with open-ended questions were used. A pre-planned schedule was used as a guide for the discussions, ensuring that the researchers remained focused on the relevant issues. According to Creswell and Parson-Clark (2018), open-ended questions encourage the flow of spontaneous comments



while suspending preconceived notions about standardised solutions, whereas focus group discussions are an effective way to gather detailed information in a short period, complementing other data collection approaches.

The questionnaire comprised three parts: Part A solicited the participants' personal information; Part B solicited the challenges and opportunities of teaching in multilingual and multicultural educational settings; and Part C focused on improvement strategies. One researcher conducted the focus group discussions and supervised the open-ended questionnaire to 30 teachers at the Teacher Resource Centre in the Opuwo area, which fulfilled numerous crucial tasks in the research process. By administering the questionnaires in person, the researcher ensured that all the participants understood the questions. Furthermore, this technique eliminated the likelihood of misinterpretation or confusion, which improved the data quality and trustworthiness.

### **Ethical consideration**

Before collecting data, the authors requested and obtained permission to conduct research from the Kunene region Directorate of Education, Arts, and Culture. Permission was also granted by the principals of all the participating schools. Ethical issues were observed throughout the study. For example, prior to visiting the participating schools, the researchers contacted the school(s) to discuss the study's scope and objective, as well as the expected outcomes. Consent was also obtained from all the participants. They were notified that their responses would be kept anonymous. As a result, the researchers removed all identifiable information, including personal and school names. The participants were informed that their involvement was entirely voluntary, that they may withdraw at any time, and that no one was forced to participate in the study (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014).

### **Data analysis**

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data for the current study. Transcriptions of focus group discussions and responses to open-ended questions were categorised and classified before being assessed for patterns that emerged as themes using Creswell's (2012) technique. This technique allowed the researchers to identify and explore patterns, themes, and trends in the data, yielding rich and meaningful results. Thematic analysis is effective for delving into the complexities of multicultural education, as

well as understanding the many viewpoints and experiences of teachers working in remote areas like the Kunene region.

## Results

Table 1 below displays the biographical information of participants.

**Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the participants**

	Demographic Characteristics		Total	%
1	Gender	Male	10	33.3%
		Female	20	66.6%
2	Age range	20-25	0	0%
		26-30	6	20%
		31-35	13	43.3%
		36-40	7	23.3%
		41-45	2	6.7%
		46-50	2	6.7%
		51-55	0	0%
		56-60	0	0%
3	Qualifications	Bachelor of Education [B.Ed. Hons]	15	50%
		Basic Education Teacher Diploma	10	33.3%
		Advanced Diploma in Education	4	13.3%
		Master's Degree in Education	1	3.3%
		PhD in Education	0	0%
4	Years of experience	1-5	8	26.7%
		6-10	11	36.7%
		11-15	5	16.7%
		16-20	1	3.3%
		21-25	3	10%
		26-30	2	6.7%
		31+	0	0%
5	Phase of teaching	Junior Primary	5	16.7%
		Senior Primary	9	30%
		Secondary	16	53.3%

$N=30$



Table 1 shows an overview of the biographical information of the participants. The analysis of 30 teachers reveals that male participation was prevalent (10 males, 20 Females), with the majority having experience clustered between 6-10 years (11 teachers) and 1-5 years (8 teachers) of service. Notably, most of the teachers work in the secondary phase (16), followed by senior primary (9), and junior primary (5 teachers). In addition, Table 1 displays a significant variation in teacher qualifications. While only four (4) teachers hold an Advanced Diploma or Master's Degree in Education, most have a Bachelor of Education (Honours) (15 teachers) or a Basic Education Teacher Diploma (10 teachers).

Several themes emerged from the analysis of data regarding the challenges and opportunities for multicultural and multilingual education approaches. The results are, therefore, presented based on the themes as follows.

### Theme I: Challenges that teachers face

Regarding the question on the obstacles participants face in such an educational setting, one recurring issue that emerged was the learners' tendency to utilise their vernacular languages during lessons. This language propensity, while representing cultural pride and identity, is a significant hindrance to the pursuit of a collaborative learning experience. For instance, one participant remarked that:

*Learners prefer to communicate in their native languages; during my lessons, I instructed learners who did not speak the same mother tongue to sit together. I reinforced the rule of communicating in English during lessons. (T1)*

*Learners showed greater regard for their languages. To promote variety in class presentation, I requested learners to interpret specific topics into their language. (T5)*

*Some learners from other backgrounds cannot express themselves well in English. (T8)*

Furthermore, the results show that some learners' perceptions of cultural superiority are intricately related to their linguistic choices. That is, tensions arise in a culture of diverse cultural norms and values when some learners claim their background is superior to that of their peers. This disagreement not only undermines classroom cohesiveness, it also calls into question the very core of inclusive education. One participant shared a related experience that:

*When learners arrived at my class one day, there were very few chairs, so I told the boys to give their chairs to the girls, explaining that women were our mothers and we should treat them with respect. And this irritated Otjiherero boys, who said that such behaviour was not customary in their culture. (T2)*

Another challenge was related to the evaluation of oral work for learners who do not speak the dominant language of instruction, in this case the Otjiherero language. The inability to fully comprehend and evaluate these learners' oral contributions impedes their academic progress and undermines the concept of fair assessment. One participant commented that:

*“Mmm...last year I had one learner who did not know Otjiherero and it was very difficult to do the oral assessment. This year I also have learners that do not know the language and I have no idea of how to go about it” (T7).*

Another participant shared that:

*“Learners preferred their home language, some viewed their culture as superior, and language barriers made participation and assessment complicated” (T23).*

The results further show that there were some social dynamics that emerged from the analysis as learners from various cultural backgrounds interact in the classroom setting. It was noted that some learners are hesitant to participate in class activities or sit with peers from unknown ethnic backgrounds. This may impede the establishment of coherent learning groups and reinforce social differences in the classroom. One participant reported that:

*Some learners prefer to sit in pairs or groups with those from their own culture group, rather than those from different cultural groups. As a teacher, um... I always addressed the subject of learning from one another and matched learners from diverse cultural groups to do so. (T9)*

Participant T9 also mentioned that even when diverse groups are formed, the challenge persists, since certain learners are reserved and unwilling to participate in group discussions. This reluctance, possibly caused by cultural differences and linguistic barriers, can stifle the exchange of ideas and preclude collaborative learning experiences. Accordingly, some of participants responded that:

*During group talks, learners from specific cultures may become more reserved and unwilling to speak up. As a result, I promoted individual reflection before group discussion so that they could organise their thoughts, as I employed smaller group conversations. (T10)*

*Group work was challenging due to learners being reserved in mixed groups and the slow pace of translation. (T15)*

While conducting the current study also it was brought to light that participants regularly employed translation or requested some learners to translate for others to



ensure that everyone understood the learning content. This method, however, was not without its downsides. For instance, dependency on learner translators may result in incomplete or incorrect translations, lowering the clarity and efficacy of instruction.

## Theme 2: Opportunities for teachers

Regarding the question of opportunities for teaching in a multicultural and multilingual education context, it emerged that the diversity of their classrooms has considerably aided participants in their professional development as teachers. Participants obtained essential experience while immersed in a multicultural and multilingual workplace, transforming them into more culturally sensitive and successful teachers. Some participants indicated that:

*In a multicultural classroom, I was exposed to a variety of cultural perspectives, traditions, and values, and the interaction with learners from different cultures helped me gain a deeper understanding and appreciation for cultural differences and similarities. This experience helped me become a better educator. (T8)*

*I discovered that different cultures have different values and require different types of treatment. (T2)*

The analysis shows that interacting with learners from various backgrounds fostered a deep appreciation for the world's different cultures, which has translated into a more sensitive and inclusive teaching practice. Participants also stated that being exposed to a variety of cultural perspectives, traditions, and values opened their eyes to the beauty of human differences. One participant responded that:

*“Promoting cross-cultural understanding and adapting instructional strategies reinforced my commitment to culture inclusive learning environment, where all learners feel valued, supported and empowered to succeed” (T6).*

The participants anonymously agreed that recognising the unique needs of each learner has become a cornerstone of their approach. Participants have learnt that different cultures hold different values and require diverse instructional styles. This realisation has spurred them to learn basic greetings and phrases in Otjijherero, while also encouraging learners to experiment with Portuguese. These small steps have fostered a sense of community and broken-down language barriers. For instance, one participant stated:

*“Learning to take failure as motivation to work harder and to do better next time. Taking full accountability for my mistakes with the mindset to create room for improvement” (T6).*

The commitment to cultural inclusivity ensures that all learners feel valued, supported, and empowered to reach their full potential. The participants acknowledged that, in addition to language, they have worked to promote cross-cultural understanding by adapting their teaching strategies to resonate with diverse learning styles on an ongoing basis. One participant stated that:

*Facing language difficulties and varied learning styles motivated me to investigate alternate teaching methodologies. For example, including visual arts, hands-on activities, and technology-based resources can help teachers adopt multiple teaching styles and suit varied learning preferences. By adjusting my teaching methods, I was able to effectively engage and support learners from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds. (T8)*

The results show that the participants learnt to communicate effectively using simple, straightforward words, gestures, and nonverbal cues. The emphasis on communication also led to improved active listening skills, which helped them understand their learners' needs and provide a more helpful learning environment. One participant explained that:

*Communicating differently with learners who spoke a different language or dialect pushed me to develop my communication abilities. I'm learning how to transmit information using simplified language gestures and nonverbal clues. Furthermore, I improved my active listening abilities to better comprehend learners' wants and concerns, resulting in a more helpful learning environment. (T27)*

Finally, the participants reported that teaching in a multicultural and multilingual setting has been a transformational experience. It has not only broadened their perspective of the world, it has also given the participants the tools they need to establish a truly inclusive classroom environment in which all learners can succeed.

### **Theme 3: Strategies for effective classroom**

Regarding the question of the best strategies to use in a multicultural and multilingual classroom, the following strategies emerged from the analysis of data: effective communication, engaging activities, language development, and peer collaboration.

#### **Effective communication**

The participants emphasised the need to use clear and concise language, visual aids and examples, and active listening in a diverse classroom. They stated that employing simple terminology and sentence patterns helps all learners grasp concepts; however, visuals such as drawings, charts, and demonstrations can aid comprehension beyond



words. At the same time, paying close attention to learners' nonverbal cues and questions can help identify areas that require explanation. The participants reported that:

*Navigating language barriers in the classroom requires a multifaceted approach to ensure effective communication with learners who may have varying proficiency levels in the language of instructions firstly, employing clear and concise language during instruction helps all learners understand the material better. (T3)*

*I teach English as a second language, and only English is spoken during lessons. I make every effort to include every learner in my class; but I do not have a precise technique. (T2)*

### **Engaging activities**

The analysis shows that the participants have recognised the importance of cooperative learning and social contact in learning by incorporating pair work, group work, and oral presentations. Participants stated that pairing strong and weak learners' enables collaboration and scaffolding. The participants agreed that grouping learners by skill level can give targeted exercises while also encouraging interaction. Furthermore, participants noted that oral presentations encouraged learners to communicate orally, hence, increasing confidence and speaking skills. One participant commented that:

*I translate from English to another language so that they can understand better. Giving a couple of oral presentation tasks, pairing weak learners with strong learners, and having them do certain activities together. I divided them into groups based on their performance in my subject, and this Improved their reading skills (T1).*

### **Language development**

A participant mentioned that incorporating both comprehensive (read for pleasure) and rigorous (focused reading) exercises improves reading comprehension. The participant suggested that while translation for clarification might be beneficial, excessive use can impede English development. They emphasised the need to encourage learners to use English as their primary language in class to promote immersion and practice. They were, however, careful to do this with sensitivity and help for beginners. For example, one participant shared that:

*"I teach English as a second language and only English is used in class. There is an English-only policy in the classroom, and any learner who uses his or her mother tongue was punished" (T4).*

Another participant added that:

*In a multilingual classroom, fostering inclusion and engagement for all learners, regardless of language background, is critical. Here are some techniques to accomplish this. Language support. Provide language support services such as language buddies or peer tutoring, in which certain learners who are fluent in a specific language can assist a peer who is studying that language. (T19)*

The participants noted that effective strategies necessitate flexibility and adaptation to learners' demands. They also mentioned that providing a safe space for questions and mistakes increased engagement while encouraging the learners to learn from one another promotes collaboration and language practice. The participants shared that:

*I try to involve other learners who may comprehend the language. I prepare thoroughly and try to incorporate the other language into the lesson. (T5)*

*During the lessons, learners are independently asking questions and no one is allowed to laugh when another person makes a mistake, so learners are motivated and they want to improve on their language skills. (T20)*

*I include everyone in the lessons; I usually call out their names and ask questions and I strictly use only English during my lessons so that everyone is included. (T28)*

## Discussions

The current study investigated the challenges and opportunities of teaching in multilingual and multicultural contexts in Namibia. Integrating the sociocultural theory into this study provides valuable insights into how social and cultural factors influence learning and instructional practices. The discussion of the findings of this study is presented under three key themes.

### Theme I: Challenges that teachers face

The findings of this study reveal several significant challenges encountered by teachers in multicultural and multilingual classrooms. Firstly, the tendency of learners to revert to their vernacular languages during lessons poses a considerable obstacle to foster a cohesive learning environment. While this linguistic preference may signify cultural pride, it hampers the efficacy of instruction conducted in a common language, often English. The results have shown that language barriers often affect learning when learners prefer using their home languages; normally, it leads to communication difficulties and hinders a unified learning experience in the classroom. This language



barrier may not only impede on efficient communication between teachers and learners, it may also lead to low educational attainment levels. Vygotsky emphasised the significance of language in cognitive development, proposing that language not only reflects, but also shapes thought (Mahn & John-Steiner, 2012). The difficulties associated with language barriers and the inclination towards using native languages by learners are consistent with Vygotsky's focus on the significance of language in facilitating learning. Teachers encountering these difficulties might utilise Vygotsky's concepts by acknowledging the importance of language in teaching and implementing techniques that support language growth while enhancing understanding and engagement. This finding corroborates with the ideas of Fielding and Harbon (2013), who commend that teachers play a critical role in selecting the languages used in classrooms, which has a direct impact on the learning process, outcomes, and the formation of learners' identities.

The emergence of tensions stemming from cultural superiority beliefs further complicates classroom dynamics, disrupting unity and inclusivity. In other words, the differences in cultural norms and values can cause tension, particularly regarding respect and gender roles. Vygotsky (1978) posited that learning is inherently social and takes place within distinct cultural contexts. This study highlights the impact of sociocultural influences on educational experiences by emphasising the tensions that arise from different cultural norms and values. Teachers can, therefore, implement Vygotsky's sociocultural theory by acknowledging and appreciating the variety of backgrounds and perspectives among their students, utilising cultural assets to enhance educational opportunities, and cultivating an inclusive atmosphere that promotes respect and worth for all learners.

Furthermore, this study found the difficulty of assessing oral work for learners who are not proficient in the language of instruction exacerbates disparities in academic evaluation. Garcia and Kleyn (2016) emphasise the ability of teachers to advocate for inclusive environment that values and promotes multilingualism. With reference to the sociocultural theory, the challenges in evaluating oral work for learners who are not skilled in the language of instruction emphasise the significance of comprehending each learner's zone of proximal development (ZPD). The ZPD refers to the range of tasks that a learner can do with the help of an adult or with the assistance of more skilled peers, as opposed to tasks that they can accomplish independently (Mahn & John-Steiner, 2012). Teachers can utilise Vygotsky's framework to customise instruction based on learners' specific requirements, offering suitable assistance and direction to facilitate their advancement within their ZPD.

## Theme 2: Opportunities for teachers

Despite the challenges mentioned in the first theme, teaching in a multicultural and multilingual context offers numerous opportunities for professional and personal growth. The teachers reported that gaining invaluable experience enhanced their cultural awareness and sensitivity. Exposure to diverse perspectives, traditions, and values enriched their understanding of human differences, fostering a more inclusive teaching practice. Scholars (Banks, 2009; Lauridsen & Lillemose, 2016; Naz et al., 2023, Reid & Major, 2017) have shown that exposure to different cultures improves the educational experience of both learners and teachers. Their findings highlight the potential benefits of multicultural education in promoting cultural awareness, empathy, and respect among learners, resulting in greater diversity in educational settings. Multicultural education has been shown to improve critical thinking, brainstorming, and problem-solving skills in the classroom, resulting in a more inclusive and intellectually stimulating learning environment. Exposing learners to different cultures and languages encourages them to question their assumptions and broaden their perspectives. This aspect of the educational process can result in a better understanding and appreciation for cultural differences, as well as the ability to navigate and thrive in multicultural settings. Erling et al. (2017, as cited in Norro, 2024) concur that multilingual education practices like scaffolding and moulding increase learning and help learners keep their multilingual identities, which is critical in all educational environments.

## Theme 3: Strategies for effective classroom

In response to the identified challenges, the participants proposed strategies aimed at enhancing communication, engagement, language development, and peer collaboration. Effective communication involves the use of clear language, visual aids, and active listening to bridge language barriers and ensure comprehension. Vygotsky (1978) highlighted the significance of social contact in the process of learning, proposing that engaging in collaborative activities facilitates the development of cognitive abilities. The strategies suggested by teachers in this study, such as group work and peer collaboration, are in line with Vygotsky's emphasis on fostering collaborative learning settings. Teachers can foster peer interaction and cooperative learning to provide learners with the chance to enhance their understanding by engaging with their peers who possess diverse language backgrounds or cultural



viewpoints. Norro (2024) also supports the use of visual support and peer translation strategies in multicultural education contexts. Norro (2024) found that group work offers a natural setting for peer assistance if using home languages was allowed, and using group work more often would gear instruction towards a more learner-centred approach. Engaging activities such as cooperative learning and oral presentations facilitate social interaction and language practice.

However, as Benson (2019) noted, equipping teachers to effectively teach in multilingual and multicultural settings necessitates specialised training. This may include language acquisition tactics, culturally relevant teaching methods, and intercultural communication skills. Furthermore, the cost of teacher training, which is frequently out of reach for many Namibians, presents a significant barrier for both individuals and the government. Language development strategies emphasise the balance between providing language support and fostering English language immersion, ensuring sensitivity to learners' proficiency levels. Flexibility and adaptability are key in implementing these strategies, creating a safe space for questions and mistakes to encourage participation and collaboration among learners.

Furthermore, Naz et al. (2023) acknowledged that some teachers may be resistant to advancing multicultural education, as they find conversations about sensitive themes like culture and identity uncomfortable or unimportant. This opposition may impede efforts to fully accept and implement intercultural education initiatives in educational institutions. Similarly, Naz et al. (2023) noted that a lack of awareness of learners' cultural backgrounds can lead to teachers unintentionally perpetuating prejudices and engaging in microaggressions.

In conclusion, the findings underscore the importance of addressing the challenges while capitalising on the opportunities presented by multicultural and multilingual education contexts. By employing effective strategies and fostering inclusive practices, teachers can create environments where all learners feel valued, supported, and empowered to succeed.

## **Conclusions and recommendations**

The findings of the current study presented some challenges and opportunities for teaching in multilingual and multicultural contexts in Namibia. The study found that learners tend to utilise their vernacular languages during lessons. Tensions arise in a culture of diverse cultural norms and values when some learners claim their

background is superior to that of their peers. Adding to the problem is the challenge of evaluating oral work for learners who do not speak the dominant language of instruction, in this case, the Otjiherero language. The inability to fully comprehend and evaluate these learners' oral contributions impedes their academic progress and undermines the concept of fair assessment. Further, it was found that even when diverse groups are formed, the challenge persists, since certain learners are reserved and unwilling to participate in group discussions. This reluctance, which may be caused by cultural differences and linguistic barriers, stifles the exchange of ideas and precludes collaborative learning experiences.

On the other hand, the study found that multicultural and interlingual educational settings provide several opportunities for both teachers and learners to improve personally and professionally. Exposing teachers and learners to other cultural norms and values increases their knowledge and understanding of diversity. In a diverse country like Namibia, having educators and learners equipped with tolerance and accepting skills would not only provide a conducive learning atmosphere, it will also increase the spirit of "Ubuntu" ("a human is human through other human" or "I am because of you") (Mabovula, 2011). Cooperative learning allows learners to learn from one another by assisting less gifted learners, however, it also allows learners to socialise, because studying together is a social activity. The inclusion of multicultural and interlingual components in both pre-service and in-service teacher training programmes is critical for equipping educators with the skills they may need to navigate these complex educational settings. Namibian teachers may establish inclusive learning environments for all learners by addressing these issues and capitalising on the benefits provided by multicultural and multilingual classrooms. Ultimately, incorporating Vygotsky's sociocultural theory into the research, improved the researchers' comprehension of the intricate interactions occurring in multilingual and multicultural educational environments. Teachers can effectively handle obstacles, take advantage of opportunities, and establish inclusive learning environments that cater to the different needs of learners in Namibia and beyond by utilising principles such as language development, the ZPD, sociocultural learning, and collaborative engagement.

## Limitations

The current study's limitations include the focus on one region and having a limited sample size. Hence, the findings cannot be generalised to other regions. However,



the results can serve as a benchmark for future scholars with research interests in multicultural and multicultural education.

## Future Research

The study recommends that future research may explore the following areas:

- A larger, state-wide study to document the variety of teachers' experiences in Namibia's multicultural and interlingual education contexts.
- Incorporating learners' views to better understand their experiences in these settings.
- Investigating the efficacy of various strategies for facilitating successful integration in multicultural and multilingual contexts.

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