

Meaningful Understanding: Institutionalised practice on inclusive education in Kunene Region, Namibia. A case study.

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When I arrived in Kunene Region in Namibia five years ago to take up my post as Inclusive Education Advisor, survey results from my predecessor provided me with information on all children with disabilities attending the regions schools. Elisabeth S was one of these children.



Physically disabled from birth Elisabeth had always attended Okanguati Combined School.

Situated in the north of the region, about three hours drive on gravel road from the town where I am based, Okanguati is a small settlement where everyone knows everyone and there is no such thing as privacy. Elisabeth's mother is the Police Station Commander – Elisabeth has been raised just like the other children, as part of the community and everyone's responsibility. She automatically attended the community school and as far as I could tell there had never been a problem – she was fully included both academically and socially. Several factors had contributed to this more or less automatic inclusion – not the least being the acquisition of the mobility cart in the above picture. Prior to obtaining the cart Elisabeth had been shuffling across the ground to get to school – a volunteer teacher at the school had intervened and the cart was provided by an overseas donor.

During my first four years working in Kunene's schools I became used to just checking on Elisabeth during my routine school visits. I spent time chatting with her mother, talked to the teachers and principal and generally felt fairly confident in

Elisabeth's ability. Academically bright she had often proved herself well able to problem solve.

The structure of the Namibian education system is such that at the end of grade 10 a learner has to pass the examination to enable them to continue and work towards their grade 12 exams. To achieve anything, to go to university or get a job, a learner needs to obtain a required number of points in the examination.

Elisabeth sat her grade 10 exams at the end of 2007 – her predicted grades were good and the Director of Education, who had always taken a particular interest in Elisabeth's education, had already spoken to me about future plans for her. Kunene region only has four High Schools where a learner can move on to grade 11 and 12 – Elisabeth would have to re-locate and attend a school away from her familiar surroundings. A few months prior to the exams and after discussion with Elisabeth and her mother, I visited the two schools of Elisabeth's choosing to audit the physical environment and talk to the school staff. Part of my pre-exam planning had also been to talk to the Examination Officer in the school and remind him to apply for Elisabeth's 'Special Considerations' of an additional 25% time for the exams.

I took my annual leave in December feeling quite confident about the planning that had been carried out. I returned in January to hear the news that Elisabeth had not obtained the minimum number of points to enable her to be promoted to grade 11 – she was one point short. We were all surprised and disappointed and Elisabeth herself was very distressed. The Director asked me to look into things and see what could be done – we both knew she was a high achiever and deserved to be promoted. Following more meetings with the Examinations Officer and the School Principal I discovered that Elisabeth had not been allocated the 'Special Considerations' 25% of additional time – this would have allowed for toilet/rest breaks that would have relieved her illness and stress. The school had failed to apply and I had failed to monitor the situation adequately. Between us we had failed the learner. I really had no excuse as I had worked in Inclusive Education for many years – both in the UK and in Namibia.

I spent the following week running around like a headless chicken – Mr Kamwi, the Regional Director, was adamant that Elisabeth should be promoted to grade 11. However we had to submit enough documented evidence to justify this action. The School Principal and I submitted a detailed report on Elisabeth's past achievements together with a comparison chart to demonstrate the difference between estimated grades and those achieved. We also submitted a medical report to show how the extra breaks would have relieved Elisabeth's situation greatly.

The effort and paperwork were worth it – we were given permission to promote Elisabeth to grade 11 - not because of her disability but because we had failed to ensure that she had her entitlements and adequate support.

A valuable lesson learnt!!!

The move to Khorixas

Eight months later Elisabeth is happy and settled and doing very well in Cornelius Goreseb High School in Khorixas. She has always been confident and independent and that has not changed – Whenever I visit the school if she is not in class I see her with a group of friends hanging around outside laughing and chatting – just a normal teenager.

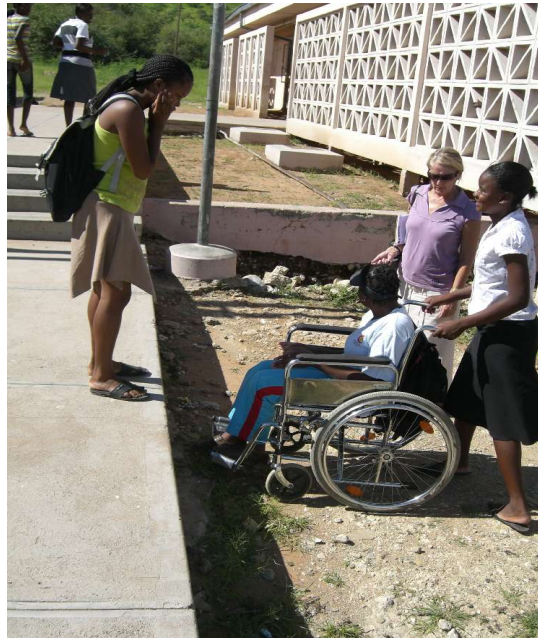
The transition for Elisabeth has been quite smooth. Partly because of her positive attitude and partly because of the support plan we worked on together involving people from many different organisations. It did feel like people were taking some responsibility and really wanted this to be as easy as possible for Elisabeth. I had inspected and assessed the two schools of Elisabeth’s choosing. My recommendation was for Cornelius Goreseb –

- the infrastructure was suitable for independent mobility,
- the Education Regional Office is based very near the school should support be needed,
- the school, its Principal, teachers, hostel and school workers were all known to me. They were looking forward to welcoming Elisabeth into the school. More importantly they realised she would need support but without the undue fuss and attention that would isolate her from the other learners. This attitude is the first major stepping stone towards inclusion.

The details of the support plan were as follows - Elisabeth and her mother were involved in every step:

Action taken	People / organisations involved
Peer support group (circle of friends) established	Learners, teachers, principal
Raising Awareness meeting for teachers	Social worker (MoHSS), teachers, IEA (Inclusive Education Advisor), Principal
Inspection of school buildings and grounds	School Inspectors and other MoE personnel, Rehabilitation Worker and Social Worker (MoHSS), Ministry of Works.
Adaptation of buildings and grounds for independent mobility	Buildings Inspector, Rehab’ worker, Ministry of Works, MoE
Introductory meeting for Hostel Staff	Hostel Staff, IEA
Initial weekly monitoring and evaluation	Friends, school staff, visits from regional school counsellor (MoE) and Social Worker.

The above table makes the whole process sound quite formal – In fact it was all quite simple and straight forward. The main thing was that Elisabeth was able to begin her school life at Goreseb with minimum fuss and maximum independence. She knew I was just a phone call away and could contact me if she needed to. Initially she did call a few times a week but it has gradually become less and less as she's settled in.



My assessment before building adaptations.
Elisabeth is dependent on friends.

I think the main thing apart from the lesson learnt in the first part of this case study is that full inclusion is everyone's responsibility. The strongest message we can give out about an inclusive society is to involve as many people as possible. We can talk and talk about what should happen but until people actually see it **can** work effectively they will not really believe it. When it works they are proud of their contribution. Even the MoE driver who took Elisabeth to Khorixas is always asking me how she is – it is as though he has a personal interest.

I remember my first year in Kunene Region – I was talking to a School Inspector about a boy in a wheelchair and a school place for him. He said to me 'What's wrong with a Special School?' I know now, 5 years later, that this Inspector has a completely different attitude as I hope do all my colleagues.

To finish the story of Elisabeth: Elisabeth is doing well at school – no longer living in the school hostel though as she felt she did not have enough privacy. She was independent enough to make the decision and the school recognised her right to do that. She was nominated to be a member of the Namibian Learners Parliament – she now represents learners with disabilities in Kunene schools in this National Learners Forum. She has been given a voice on behalf of herself and others and she has the confidence and language skills to use it. I have no doubt that in the not too distant future Elisabeth will be a very positive role model for young people in Namibia.