

## MARGINALISATION IN EDUCATION: THE CASE OF BUSHMAN-SPEAKING PEOPLE

### Introduction

The National Workshop on Marginalised Children in Namibia in 1992 defined educationally marginalised children as "those who did not have access to relevant and meaningful formal and non-formal education...due to socioeconomic, cultural, demographic and political deprivation". Normally, marginalisation refers to disadvantaged minority groups whom we identify by language or other cultural characteristics. But there are many aspects to marginalisation, the main ones being political, socio-cultural, economic, geographical, health and psychological, and the provision of education. There are two groups in Namibia where all these features combine to make marginalisation and educational deprivation extreme: the Ovahimba and Bushmen

people. This issue of the *EMIS Bulletin* takes a look at the condition of Bushman-speaking children and adults.

Educational marginalisation usually operates in two ways. Firstly, a group is distanced from education due to negative behaviour and attitudes by a more dominant group, and, secondly, the group that becomes marginalised may then marginalise itself as a defence mechanism. Few marginalised people will manage to succeed under these circumstances.

Language is one of the main features of marginalisation. In the case of Bushman-speakers, there are four main language groups, not mutually intelligible. Not even all dialects within the largest group (Khoa), are mutually intelligible. These groups are linguistically very rich. The traditional beliefs of Bushmen and Ovahimbas are integral to their cultures and identities, and could find little place in Christian National Education. Under our new Namibian Constitution, education should respect traditional religious beliefs and not marginalise them.

*Note: The word Bushman, although long used in a derogatory sense in southern Africa, is now the word of choice for some grass-roots groups. Though each language group has its own name, no all embracing term is yet recognized by all of them. Some younger leaders today declare that they wish to ennoble the word by the way they use it in the future. "Saan" is scornful in yet another Namibian language, Nama, and is furthermore unknown to many Bushman peoples (Dr Megan Biesele, personal communication).*

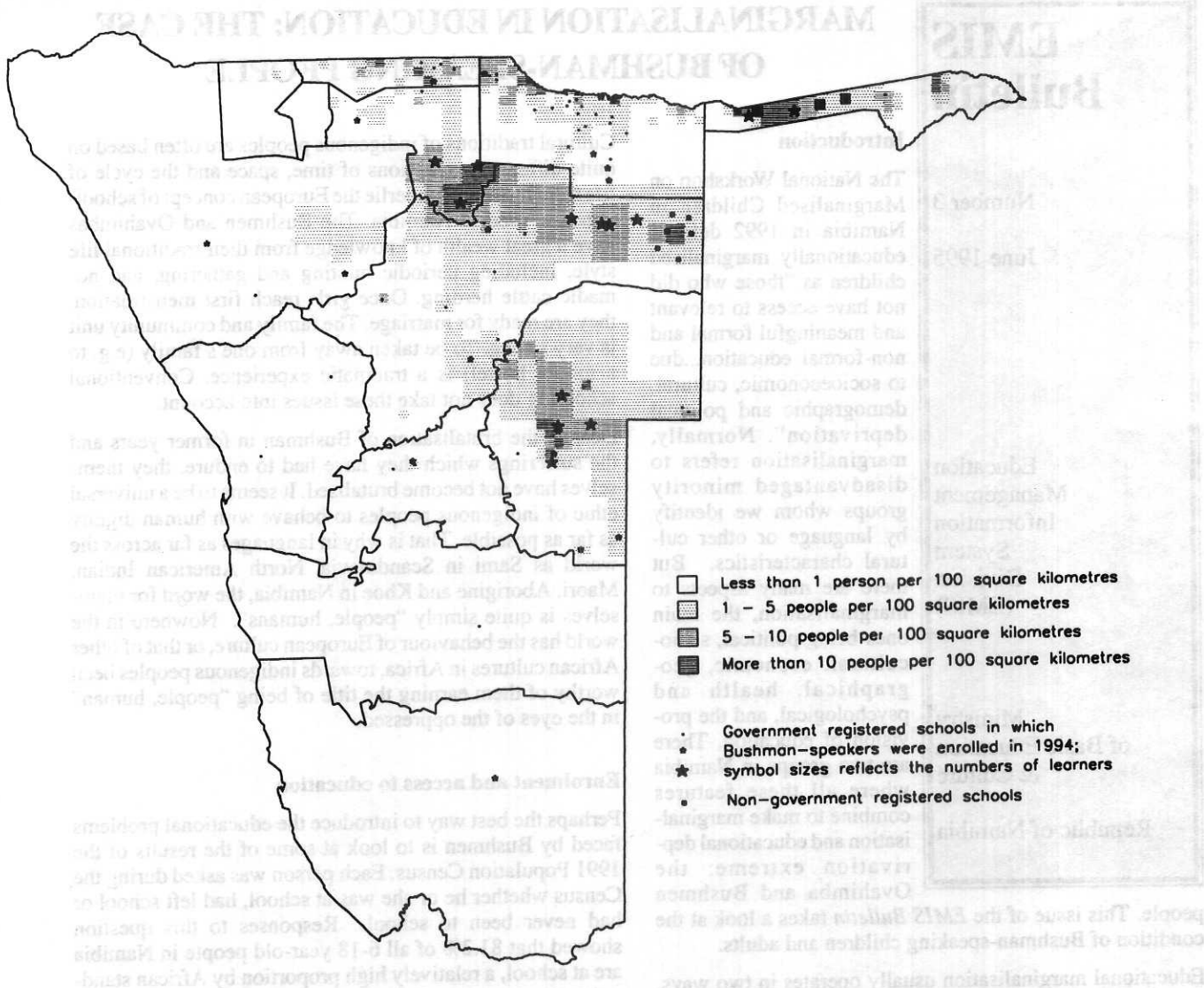
Cultural traditions of indigenous peoples are often based on quite different perceptions of time, space and the cycle of life from those that underlie the European concept of schooling now used in Namibia. The Bushmen and Ovahimbas have a great wealth of knowledge from their traditional life style, including periodic hunting and gathering, and nomadic cattle herding. Once girls reach first menstruation, they are ready for marriage. The family and community unit is very strong. To be taken away from one's family (e.g. to a school hostel) is a traumatic experience. Conventional schooling does not take these issues into account.

Despite the brutalisation of Bushman in former years and the sufferings which they have had to endure, they themselves have not become brutalised. It seems to be a universal ethic of indigenous peoples to behave with human dignity as far as possible. That is why in languages as far across the world as Sami in Scandinavia, North American Indian, Maori, Aborigine and Khoi in Namibia, the word for themselves is quite simply "people, humans". Nowhere in the world has the behaviour of European culture, or that of other African cultures in Africa, towards indigenous peoples been worthy of them earning the title of being "people, human" in the eyes of the oppressed.

### Enrolment and access to education

Perhaps the best way to introduce the educational problems faced by Bushmen is to look at some of the results of the 1991 Population Census. Each person was asked during the Census whether he or she was at school, had left school or had never been to school. Responses to this question showed that 81.2% of all 6-18 year-old people in Namibia are at school, a relatively high proportion by African standards. However, the Census also showed that only 18% of Bushman speakers of this age group were at school, a percentage that is about one quarter of the national figure!

The Census also showed that the great majority of Bushmen do not live in what was "Bushmanland", the ethnic homeland that most people think of as being home to Bushman-speakers. Map 1 shows, in fact, that these people are distributed across a wide area of north-eastern Namibia, and that the majority live in the Oshikoto, Otjozondjupa, Omaheke and Caprivi regions. It is also in these larger areas, outside the former Bushmanland, that educational problems are most acute. According to the 1991 Census, there were some 964 people aged 6-18 in "Bushmanland", of which 552 (57%) were not at school. By contrast, there were about 6 543 of this age group outside "Bushmanland", of which a staggering 5 604 (85.6%) were not at school. There were thus 10 times more Bushman-speakers not at school outside than inside the former Bushmanland.



**MAP 1**  
**The distribution of 6-18 year-old Bushman-speaking people (according to the 1991 Population and Housing Census) and schools in which Bushmen learners were enrolled in 1994.**

Low levels of enrolment are due to a number of factors, one of the most important being a lack of ready access to schools. While schools are widely scattered across areas in which most Bushman-speakers reside (Map 1), it is clear that schools are not accessible to many people. Very large areas, especially in the Omaheke and Otjozondjupa regions, are simply beyond the reach of existing schools.

Figure 1 shows that the proportion of children who are enrolled at school increase from the age of six to ten, indicating that they are often kept at home until they are older than the six or seven when most Namibians start school. Perhaps this reflects the substantial distances that many children need to walk to school.

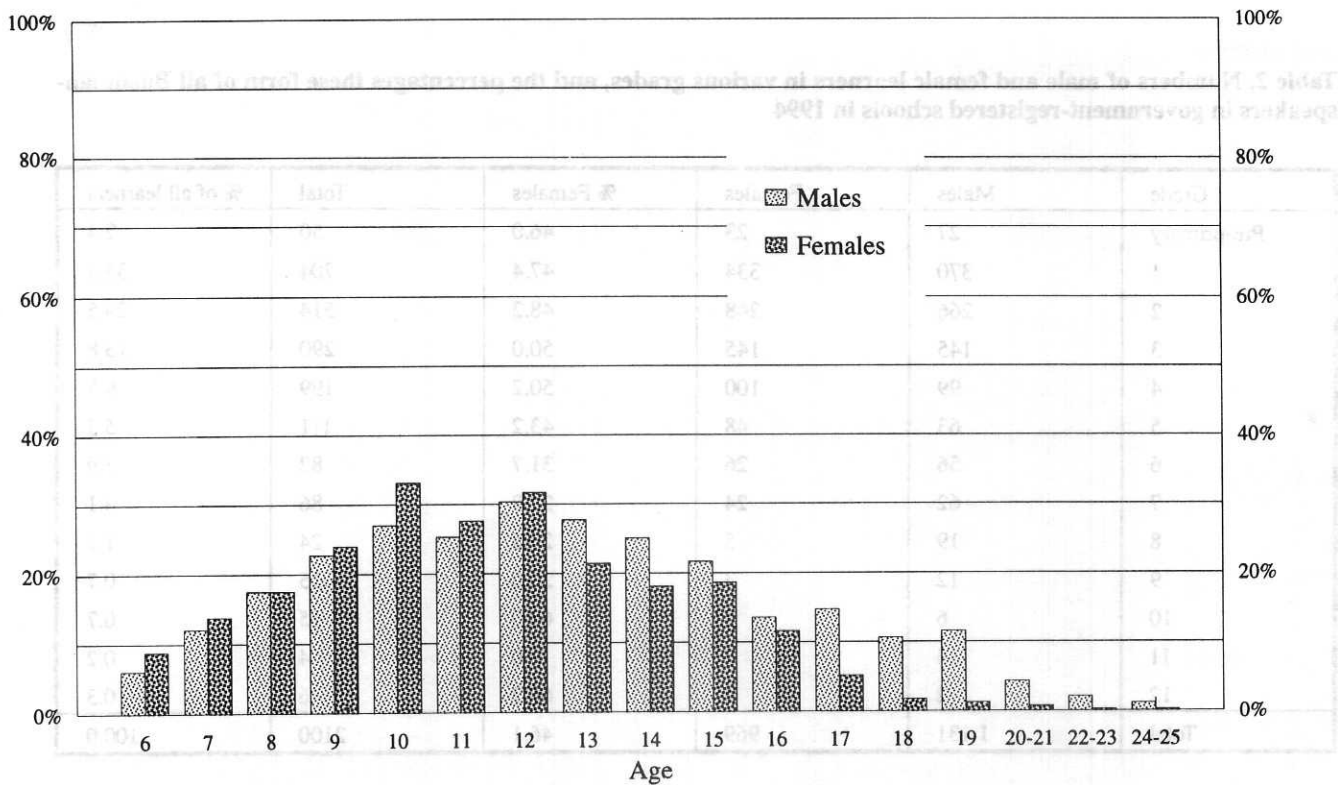
While poor school attendance rates are a major concern, it is good to note the sharp increase in the numbers of children going to school in recent years. In 1994, the Annual Education Census recorded a total of 2 100 Bushman-speakers at school. The same Census, conducted in previous years gave totals of 1 944 in 1993 and 1 766 learners in 1992. Strictly comparable figures for 1991 are not available, but the 1991 Population Census showed that a total of 1 422 Bushman learners were at school in 1991. These totals suggest that enrolments have increased annually by 10-15% during the

past three years, a rate which is much higher than the natural growth rate of school-going age groups. In addition, non government-registered schools started in recent years enrol 650-700 other children not reported in the Ministry's annual education censuses.

**School attendance by Bushman-speaking children**

The total of 2 100 Bushman-speaking learners recorded at school in August 1994 were in 116 government-registered schools. In most of these schools, numbers of Bushman-speakers were very low, as shown in Table 1. In each of 94 schools there were less than 20 such learners, and in only 22 schools were there more than 20 Bushman-speakers. This means that Bushman-speakers were very much in the minority in most schools, and in only 14 schools were more than 30% of the learners from this language group. Even in the school at Tjum!kui, traditionally thought of as the capital of "Bushmanland", only 23% of learners were Bushman-speakers.

So, while Bushman-speakers attend a good number of schools (116 of a total of 1 365 schools in Namibia), they do so as extreme minorities in most instances. Being so



**FIGURE 1**  
**Percentages of Bushman people aged 6-25 who were at school in 1991, as reported in the Population and Housing Census of that year.**

poorly represented means that most other learners and teachers are unlikely to acknowledge or sympathise with their particular needs. In extreme, but not uncommon, cases these circumstances lead to bullying and negative attitudes from other learners, and even from hostel staff and teachers. Some schools try to deal actively with such problems, but there are clear indications that this needs to be dealt with on a larger scale. In recent years, learners who are culturally more aggressive than Bushman-speakers have been sent to the Tjum!kui school in large numbers.

The majority (1 451 learners) were concentrated in 13 schools: Omatako Primary School (52 learners), Bertie van Zyl Junior Primary School (55), Ondundu Primary School (56), Drimiopsis Primary School (56), Gunichas Junior Secondary School (61), Gqaina Primary School (82), Aasvoëlnes Primary School (89), Ombili Primary School (117), M'kata Primary School (147), Omega Primary School (173), Martin Ndumba Senior Primary School (174), Mangetti Dune Primary School (184) and Tsintsabis Primary School (205 learners). These are all government reg-

istered schools for which information was available from the 1994 Annual Education Census. At least eight other non-registered schools provided schooling to Bushman speakers in 1994: the five Village School Programme schools in "Bushmanland" enrolled some 130 learners, and the three ELCIN schools in western Caprivi were attended by about 520 learners.

#### The passage of learners through schools

Getting children to school is one achievement - another is to ensure that they are educated and thus pass through the school system from Grade 1 to Grade 12. Table 2 shows the numbers of learners in different grades offered at government-registered schools, and also allows us to compare patterns of enrolment by male and female learners.

It is clear that the great majority of Bushman-speakers who start school leave before completing their primary education. Thus, the 1 707 learners in Grades 1-4 make up 81% of all those at school, leaving just 19% of learners in the

**Table 1. Numbers of government-registered schools that enrolled Bushman-speaking learners in 1994**

Number of Bushmen learners per school	Number schools	Total number of Bushmen learners	Total number of learners of other language groups
< 10	87	232	38 411
10-19	7	96	3 933
20-49	9	321	2 112
> 49	13	1 451	2 074
Total	116	2 100	46 530

**Table 2. Numbers of male and female learners in various grades, and the percentages these form of all Bushman-speakers in government-registered schools in 1994**

Grade	Males	Females	% Females	Total	% of all learners
Pre-primary	27	23	46.0	50	2.4
1	370	334	47.4	704	33.5
2	266	248	48.2	514	24.5
3	145	145	50.0	290	13.8
4	99	100	50.2	199	9.5
5	63	48	43.2	111	5.3
6	56	26	31.7	82	3.9
7	62	24	27.9	86	4.1
8	19	5	20.8	24	1.1
9	12	3	20.0	15	0.7
10	6	9	60.0	15	0.7
11	4	0	0.0	4	0.2
12	2	4	66.7	6	0.3
Total	1 131	969	46.1	2100	100.0

remaining eight higher grades. Just a tiny proportion make their way into secondary school, where only 64 or 3% of all learners were enrolled in 1994. Very few Bushman-speakers thus reach levels of education that provide them with any employment prospects. Grade 4 needs to be completed before people are likely to have acquired basic literacy and numeracy skills, so those who leave before completing this grade are unlikely to have these fundamental benefits of education. The great majority of formal jobs, especially those offered in the public sector, require a minimum of Grade 10. Very few learners end up being equipped to enter the formal job market.

The problem of declining attendance is particularly acute for girls. In Grades 1-4, the numbers of girls and boys are almost equal, but attendance rates by girls begin to drop much faster thereafter. The total number of 212 boys in Grades 5 - 9 was exactly double the 106 girls enrolled in those same grades in 1994. Many girls leave school before these grades, having reached sexual maturity and therefore an age at which they were ready for marriage. Figure 1 also shows that the proportion of girls and boys at school are similar up to the age of 12. From the age of 13, the proportion of girls drops as they leave school earlier and at a greater rate than boys.

#### Curriculum difficulties at school

While notable efforts have been made in schools started by the Village Schools Programme to create a more relevant curriculum and time-table, classroom activities in government schools are not well-suited to the needs of most Bushman learners. None of their own cultural traditions are reflected in the curriculum or in teaching materials, and few teachers are aware of cultural norms which may affect classroom performance. Another major problem is language. No Bushman-speaking children are taught their own language or in the medium of their own language in government-registered schools. The great majority of Bushman-

speaking learners are taught through either an English or Afrikaans medium; only the Village School Programme provides instruction in Ju/'hoan. The standard curriculum offered in all Namibian schools conflicts in several other ways with the needs of Bushmen children.

Corporal punishment is now banned in Namibian schools. However, many Bushman speakers still associate schooling with such beatings, a practice that is completely against their beliefs of how children should be reared.

#### The education of adults

Earlier on we showed that there has been a dramatic increase in numbers of Bushman-speakers going to school. These increases continue a pattern that has been developing over the past 20-30 years, as shown by the increasing proportion of young adults that have been to school. The first school was established in "Bushmanland" in 1962. Figure 2 shows the proportions of various age groups of males and females who have had some schooling compared with those who have never been to school. The shaded areas showing the percentages of those who have been to school include both those now at school and those who have left school. These figures indicate that very few people aged 40 and older have been to school, while for 30-40 year-olds about 5-10% have had some schooling. Some 10-20% of 20-30 year-olds have been to school, while for 10-20 year-olds 25-35% have been to school.

Even though increasing numbers of adults have been to school, most have achieved only very low levels of education. The 1991 Population Census reported some 1 572 as having left school, and Table 3 summarises their levels of completed schooling. About half of the men and two-thirds of the women who left school did not complete Grade 4 and are unlikely to have acquired basic literacy skills. Only 5.3% have completed any secondary grades, and in most cases these were the lower secondary levels. These are percentages of people who have been to school, so the

**Table 3. Percentages of Bushmen who have left school and completed various levels of education.**

Level of education	Males	Females	Total
Grades 1-3	47.2%	64.0%	53.9%
Grades 4-7	46.4%	32.4%	40.8%
Grade 8 and higher	6.4%	3.7%	5.3%

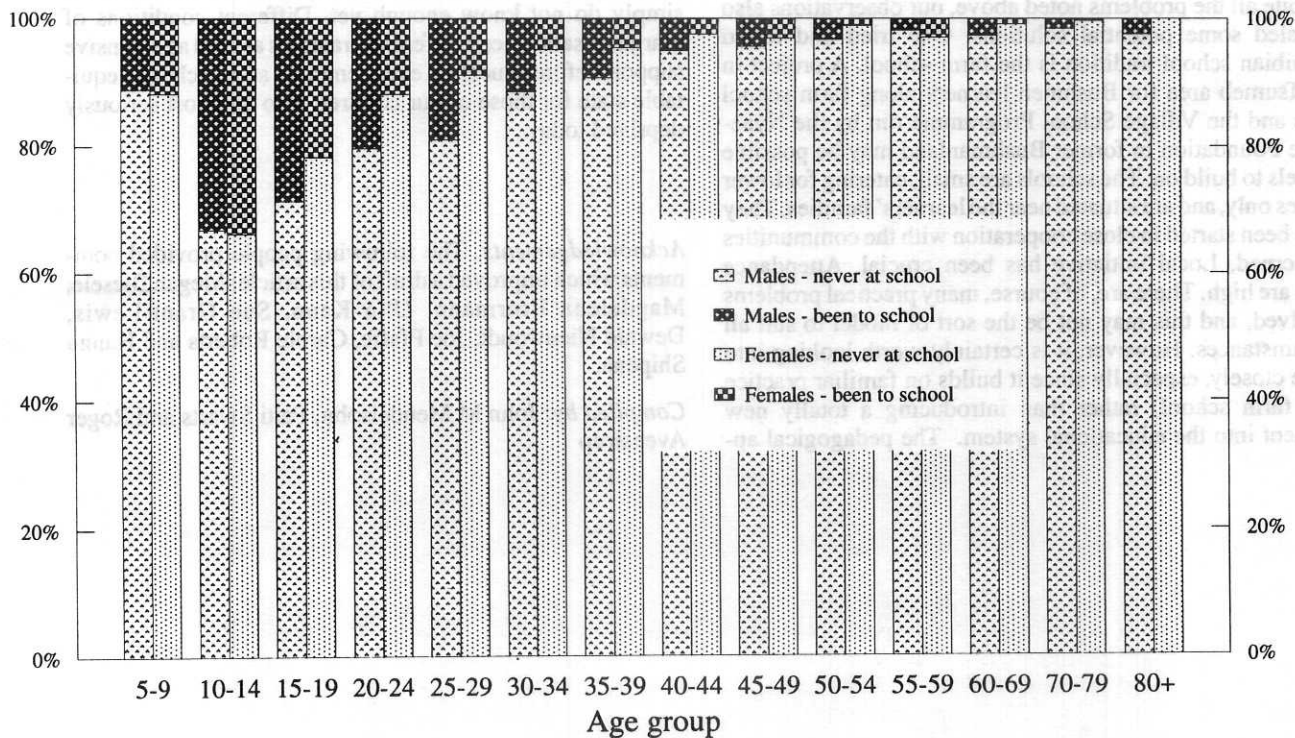
percentages of all adults (including the majority who never went to school) would be very tiny. For example, only about 0.5%, or 1 in 200 adults have had any secondary schooling, while only a handful have actually completed their secondary education.

In the oldest generations, the small proportions of men and women who had some schooling were about equal. However, the education of females is substantially behind that of males in the 20-40 year age-group, where about 10% fewer females than males have been to school (Figure 2). As shown in Table 3, women who did go to school tended to leave with lower qualifications than men. All of these results show that most Bushmen children come from homes where their parents, and especially their mothers, are unlikely to have had schooling. Most adults are illiterate and unlikely to cope in a society which expects people to read and write.

**Strategies for the future**

Our purpose here has been to use available data to investigate and highlight some of the problems faced by marginalised groups, in this case Bushmen. It is beyond our scope to suggest a comprehensive set of recommendations to improve matters, but a number of points must be made.

We have a special responsibility towards Bushmen and other marginalised Namibians. We can learn a lot from how indigenous groups elsewhere have reclaimed their linguistic and cultural heritage, and their place in the mainstream of a national culture. Formerly marginalised groups can apparently only take up their full roles in a wider national context if they are first secure in their own identities. This means that there must be an ecology of language, with research and teaching in and through the language. Of the dozens of Bushman languages, only one has an established orthography which can be used as a medium of instruction for formal



**FIGURE 2**  
Percentages of Bushman people who have never been to school in relation to their age, as reported in the 1991 Population and Housing Census

schooling. There must also be culturally affirmative curriculum and materials development, so that education is meaningful to the child within his or her immediate context.

Expenditure on education also needs to be affirmative. Any comparison of unit cost spending on children would show our expenditure on Bushman-speakers to be orders of magnitude below that for other groups. There must be adequate provision of classrooms and of qualified teachers - both Bushman-speaking teachers, and other Namibians with an appreciation of the social and cultural context of the Bushman learners. At the same time, the education of Bushmen must be done in a way which both brings them into the scenario of a national identity and respects the community from which they come. As one Ovahimba headman put it: "I do not want a school in my village. A clinic, yes, but a school, no. When the children go to school, they come back and despise us." Those who provide schooling must ensure that communities do not become divided.

A special plea must be made for flexibility in the running of schools, taking into account the needs of communities and the difficulties they may encounter in sending their children to school.

There have been tendencies for Bushmen to be treated more as objects rather than people - items worthy of study by anthropologists, musicologists, etc. They have been, and often still are treated by tour operators and tourists as only exotic displays of vanishing cultures. Philanthropic agencies may heap credit upon themselves by helping to "save" the Bushmen. Such issues raise fundamental questions of what contribution education can make to establishing self-worth, and what commercial or other interests may be at stake.

Despite all the problems noted above, our observations also revealed some potential solutions. One tried and tested Namibian school tradition is the farm school. A project in the Tsumeb area for Bushmen learners along farm school lines and the Village School Programme run by the Nyae-Nyae Foundation in former Bushmanland may be possible models to build on. The schools are small, catering for lower grades only, and are situated near the learners' families. They have been started in close cooperation with the communities concerned. Local initiative has been crucial. Attendance rates are high. There are, of course, many practical problems involved, and this may not be the sort of model to suit all circumstances. However, it is certainly worth looking into more closely, especially since it builds on familiar practice (the farm school) rather than introducing a totally new element into the educational system. The pedagogical ap-

proach tried out in the Nyae-Nyae Village schools, developing the language, producing local materials, and training teachers on-the-job, also represents a potential pedagogical resource which could have a significant ripple effect.

Knowledge of Bushman languages is not restricted to Bushmen themselves and a few foreign academics. There are a number of farmers or people who grew up on farms, who speak one or even two of the Bushman languages fluently. Similarly, there are a number of young teachers who grew up on farms together with Bushmen, who have first-hand knowledge and appreciation of Bushman cultural values and behaviour. Such important human resources should be tapped.

Finally, the initiatives taken by farmers' associations and communities represent a growing awareness of the problem and a desire to help do something about it. It is these positive intentions which can provide a foundation for further development and cooperation between the government and other interested parties.

### Conclusions

In this *Bulletin*, we have focused mainly on the situation of Bushmen as a marginalised group. The facts and figures almost speak for themselves. People are scattered across a wide area, few have access to education, even fewer progress to higher grades, girls leave school earlier than boys, children are not taught in their own language, and they represent minorities at most schools. A tiny fraction of their parents have had any schooling, mostly at elementary levels, and the education of adult women is behind that of men. There is a range of human, social, cultural, linguistic, curricular and ideological issues behind the statistics. We simply do not know enough yet. Different conditions of marginalisation need different strategies as well as extensive support before education even remotely approaches an equitable state for those of our children who are most seriously deprived today.

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