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## Child Neglect in Namibia: Emerging Themes and Future Directions

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## **Abstract**

This paper initiates the conversation on the conceptualisation of child neglect in Namibia, reporting findings from a small study undertaken in 2017. The research is a collaboration between academics at the University of Namibia, Africa, University of Bristol, and Cardiff University in the United Kingdom. The study is the first of its kind in Namibia, offering original knowledge about what constitutes neglect for children in the local context of child-rearing practice. Qualitative interviews with practitioners in schools and social-care organisations were undertaken in three of the fourteen political regions of Namibia. Interviews ascertained participants' thoughts and understandings of child neglect at individual and community levels. Teenage-pregnancy and substance misuse emerged as central to the conceptualisation of neglect within the local context, with a tension between Western and indigenous child-rearing practices. This paper offers rich insights into the social construction of child neglect amongst indigenous communities in Namibia, identifying a need for knowledge gathering into broader aspects of child health and wellbeing within Namibia's diverse indigenous peoples. The authors call for future co-produced research which engages local communities and stakeholders in investigating this issue, to improve the health and wellbeing of Namibian children in congruence with the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

## **Key Words**

Child neglect, child maltreatment, Namibia, schools, social work, sub-Saharan Africa.

## Introduction

Despite being one of Africa's more affluent countries (World Bank, 2016), almost a third of the population in Namibia live below the national poverty line (28.7%) (GRN, 2013). The Republic of Namibia is south-west of Africa and borders Angola and Zambia to the north, Botswana to the east and South Africa to the south (Sharley, 2018). It is a vast country with a surface area of 824, 268 km<sup>2</sup>, but sparsely inhabited with a population just short of two and half million people (NSA, 2017). Namibia was a German colony from 1884 to 1915 and was thereafter administered by South Africa's apartheid regime. It gained independence from South Africa in 1990, following a protracted war of liberation. Namibia has 14 political regions with around 11 ethnic groups, a predominant presence of a particular ethnic group in a region, influenced by the South African colonial rule along racial and ethnic lines. Even though English was adopted as the official language in 1990, Namibia is a highly multilingual country (Tötemeyer, 2010).

Although Namibia is categorised as an upper-middle-income country, it has one of the most unequal distributions of income per capita in the world with a Gini coefficient of 0.572 (MHSS, 2013; World Bank, 2016; Sharley, 2018). In the absence of country-specific literature or guidance on responding to the complex public health issue of child neglect (Taylor and Daniel, 2005; Sharley, 2018), the aim of the study was to gather preliminary understandings on what constitutes neglect for Namibian children within the local context (Rankopo and Osei-Hwedie, 2011).

Child-headed households are prevalent in communities and perhaps unsurprisingly amongst the poorest. Where there is more than one child, the older child is typically made 'head of household' and is allocated responsibility for the care of all siblings and upkeep of the home. The older child is given huge responsibility at a young age, and deprived of enjoying a normal childhood including access to quality education (Nekongo-Nielsen and Mbukusa, 2013; UNDP, 2018:SDG4). Knowledge and insight into the functioning of both household contexts is central to understanding a child's likelihood of experiencing neglectful-parenting or inadequate levels of care in each setting (Sharley, 2018).

Child neglect is a common form of maltreatment in both developed and developing nations that affects the physical, emotional, social, health and educational wellbeing of children. In order to understand the problem of child neglect, the concept needs to be clarified. Although the concept originates from first world countries (Laird, 2016), the subject continues to receive limited attention compared to physical or sexual abuse in a global context (Taylor and Daniel, 2005). It is widely understood that the definition of neglect differs between disciplines and across cultures (Spyrelis, 2013). The World Health Organisation (2002) defines child neglect as a failure of a parent to provide for the development of the child – where the parent is in a position to do so – in one or more of the following areas: health, education, emotional development, nutrition, shelter and safe living conditions.

Neglect is therefore distinguished from circumstances of poverty in that neglect can occur only in cases where reasonable resources are available to the family or caregiver. Child neglect can manifest in various ways, including non-compliance with health care recommendations, failure to seek appropriate medical attention, deprivation of food, and the failure of a child physically to thrive (UNDP, 2018:SDG2/3). Other causes include the exposure of children to drugs, and inadequate protection from environmental dangers. In addition, abandonment, inadequate supervision, poor hygiene and deprivation of education have all been considered as evidence of neglect (ISPCAN, 2018; UNDP, 2018:SDG3/4). Laird (2016) differentiates between six categories of child neglect: physical, supervisory, educational, emotional, nutritional and medical.

The Child Care and Protection Act (2015, p16) of Namibia defines child neglect in a similar light as ‘a failure in the exercise of parental responsibilities to provide for the child's basic physical, intellectual, emotional or social needs’ stipulating children’s rights to basic conditions of living, including food, shelter, clothing, care and protection, as well as adequate health care, education, play, and leisure. The Act also specifies that caregivers provide rights according to their abilities and financial capacities. The harsh realities of extreme poverty and economic inequalities that many Namibian families face, raise many challenges within local communities, and result in the inability of many to adequately provide for their children’s basic needs. For this reason, a culturally-relevant definition of child neglect is needed for practice and policy contexts (Gray *et al.*, 2010; Laird, 2008) that responds to issues of inequality and discrimination within the local community, promotes social justice, and understands children within their own context and relationships (BASW, 2018:2.14).

The government of the Republic of Namibia ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of a Child (UNCRC) (1989) and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (2004).

Whilst there has been a Child Care and Protection Act 3 of 2015, the Act has not been implemented, and the associated regulations and procedures are yet to be finalised by the Ministry of Gender Equality and Child Welfare (Amukwelele, 2017; Sharley, 2018). Consequently, the outdated South African legislation, namely the Children's Act 33 of 1960 is still being applied. Laird (2016a and 2016b) critically assesses the relevance of conceptualisations of child neglect in sub-Saharan Africa, arguing that attitudes and values from America and the United Kingdom have been embedded in practice through the domestication of the CRC since its inception in 1990 (Sharley, 2018, p2). Laird (2016b) suggests child neglect is an ethnocentric notion, that requires careful scrutiny to investigate its suitability before assuming social work practice relevance and transferability from western perspectives to indigenous settings (Meinck *et al.*, 2015).

In the absence of country-specific empirical research on neglect (Sharley, 2018) a small literature exists in the wider sub-Saharan African context (Lartey, 2008; Pierce and Bozalek, 2009; Mbagaya *et al.*, 2013; Laird, 2016a and 2016b) alongside studies into the implementation and assessment of child maltreatment prevention and protection services which provide context (GRN, 2013; Amukwelele, 2017). This article responds to a gap in country-specific research and proposes the development of a larger-scale study which contributes to evidence-based knowledge to support practitioners and improve the health and wellbeing of Namibian children (Sharley, 2018; UNDP, 2018).

## Methodology

With the purpose of exploring practitioners constructions of child neglect, in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with life-skills teachers, school caretakers, and social workers.

Interviews were undertaken in three of the 14 political regions in Namibia: north, central, and south. A purposive sampling method (Newman, 2014) was applied to select two primary schools in each region, with two members of school staff interviewed at each school (n=12). Life skills teachers were included in the sample because they offer non-assessed teaching that equips learners with skills to cope with everyday life, alongside counselling. School 'caretakers', (although mostly found at boarding schools), are usually community members or parents who cook daily meals for the school's feeding programme (SABER Country Report, 2015). Since the 1990s, the School Feeding Program has been an integral part of the Namibian Government's strategy to reduce the impact of poverty and expand access to educational opportunities by providing a mid-morning meal of fortified porridge to all learners (WFP, 2012). In addition to the four members of school staff (n=12), one statutory social worker (n=3) was also interviewed in each of the three regions with the purpose of contextualising understanding and gathering data on child neglect across each area.

Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethical Review Committees of Cardiff University and the University of Namibia, with permission to conduct the study obtained from the Permanent Secretaries of the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture and the Ministry of Gender Equality and Child Welfare in Namibia. In addition, permission was also sought from the six school principals,

who facilitated contact with the participants. An information sheet was given to each participant with contact details of the researchers. Informed consent was obtained from each participant. Two members of the research team carried out the interviews outside of school hours between June and August 2017, using a semi-structured interview schedule. Interviews on average lasted between 30 to 45 minutes. Whereas the majority of interviews were conducted in English, researchers were multilingual, and three interviews were undertaken in local languages. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were translated in English. To preserve the anonymity of participants, names and identifying details were removed. The participants varied in terms of practice experience, ranging from one year to some who were close to retirement. Eleven participants were female, four were male. Ten participants had formal university degrees (in education or counselling), three had diplomas, one had undertaken short counselling courses. All three social workers were female, qualified with degrees, and currently in practice in the local communities. The caretaker had no formal education.

Thematic analysis was utilised to identify patterns and themes within the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Transcriptions were read in a line-by-line and word-by-word manner by the four authors (both Namibian and British Researchers) to enable familiarity with the data. Preliminary themes and subthemes were identified. Several rounds of data analysis were completed and themes discussed until consensus was reached. This work was predominantly undertaken during visits by Namibian researchers to the United Kingdom in 2018 and via regular Skype discussions. Data analysis was enriched and challenged by the fact that the research team consisted of researchers from indigenous and western backgrounds, critically analysing data from diverse perspectives. This in

some ways allowed for the researchers from the United Kingdom to easily 'find the familiar strange' (Mannay, 2010) and to question, rather than take for granted any of the themes or concepts that emerged.

## **Main Discussion**

This paper presents three themes which emerged during thematic analysis of the data: (i) Western versus indigenous child-rearing patterns, (ii) teenage pregnancy, and (iii) substance abuse. Open-ended questions were framed around understandings of children's basic needs, what a child needs to thrive and flourish, and how to provide for their health and wellbeing. Each participant was asked what child neglect looked like, how they observed neglect in their individual roles, and what their response would be. Pregnancy and alcohol use were most commonly cited by participants as indicators of neglect alongside lack of appropriate care and supervision. Indigenous child-rearing practices were recognised as impacting upon birth registration, care-giving, access to services, and consequently the child's opportunity to achieve health and wellbeing. All three themes were identified by all four researchers, independently, during the phases of data coding.

### Western versus indigenous patterns

The first overarching theme emerging from the interviews was the tension between Western and indigenous child rearing practices, with regards to birth registration and the school curriculum. The registration process was seen by staff as difficult to understand for parents and sometimes as

bureaucratic, and tough to navigate. There is a normative cultural assumption in some Namibian communities, whereby children need to be registered by their father, and mothers often wait for the father to undertake this responsibility. It can be seen as shameful to be a single mother, and participants reported that mothers did not believe they could register the baby alone. In addition, the registration by the father also denoted some responsibility for the child; fathers who deny paternity of a child also contribute to non-registration. This was highlighted in the following extract:

*According to my opinion...these days it happens that. Boy can impregnates a girl, and from there the boy refuse (deny paternity), and he also refuse to give the documents (for birth registration) that one is child neglect. Lucky [Life Skills Teacher]*

It is the case however that mothers can register a child, even if the father is absent. The lack of registration by the mother or father was deemed as a significant omission and neglectful in itself:

*'But in high school and afterwards you cannot do anything without a birth certificate. They are regarded as non-citizens, because they don't have their birth certificates. For me it is already neglect when a child do not have their birth certificates'. Tutaleni [Social Worker]*

In some other bordering countries and regions registration requirements are different and this further contributes to this problem:

*'It applies to, to both [locations]. It seems to them that national documents are not so important, they only came to realise now that obtaining those documents make you to be a proud Namibian or be heard or have access to resources has been distributed by the government' Grace [Life Skills Teacher]*

In Namibia children not registered by their parents are at huge disadvantage, as birth registration is the gateway to claiming Child Welfare Grants (MGECW, 2010).

In terms of the school curriculum, there was some sense of a disconnect between child-rearing practices and western culture, potentially exemplified by the registration of birth process. The curriculum is informed by a western perspective (Semali, 2002) and was not always relevant or appropriate for the context in which it operates:

*'...sometimes we cover the family as a theme...or we may cover our home as a theme....when we start to cover to these...in class, I get really touched, because there will be a child who cannot take part in the class discussions...and the children will also not even have a home that they could talk about, because the family is only living in a shack. We may proceed in the class to talk about 'my bedroom'....but the poor child does not even have a bedroom of his or her own and may not be able to contribute anything'. Anna [Relief Teacher]*

This aspect of the curriculum would seem inappropriate, and potentially ostracising or damaging for children who do not have such seemingly taken for granted luxuries. In the extract the teacher notes how some children maybe living *'in a shack'* and that many do not have experience of happy, supportive nuclear families which was the focus of the session:

*'At times I was hoping that we could change the themes we cover in class. But we cannot do that unfortunately (because this is the curriculum). There are children that feels hurt because of these themes covered in school and they end up that they rebel and want to drop out from school.' Marlene [Life Skills Teacher]*

The teacher suggests that most of the children attending the school are living under hugely difficult circumstances of extreme poverty and sometimes homelessness, which make aspects of the

curriculum irrelevant. In these circumstances, it is understandable that education may not be prioritised by families. The teacher notes:

*'Currently we are faced with small children who have no food to eat...they do not have regular meals...these children are coming to school when they are ill and may not concentrate in class, so what is the use of these children sitting in the classroom but not concentrating at all?'*  
**Marlene [Life Skills Teacher]**

However, for parents and single mothers, in particular, who had very little family, practical, or financial support, giving up employment was impossible if they were not to starve:

*'There can be neglect because parents and the community don't recognise and therefore don't care about the needs of the children, but then there can also be neglect because you have a single mother, who is working alone, and says has 5 children and she has none to help her with these kids when she is at work'.* **Sonia [Female Life Skills Teacher]**

In Namibia the balance between providing financial stability and finding time to care for children is difficult to achieve. This was particularly the case for those whose child's birth was not registered as they would not be able to claim child maintenance grants.

In terms of community responsibility and tradition whereby the role of the extended-family assist with child-rearing (Brown, 2011), there is an increasing disconnect between a Westernised culture of nuclear families and that of the indigenous population. Some Namibian cultures have historically possessed a wide range of community involvement in the raising of children (Twum-Danso Imoh and Ame, 2012). In this tradition, an individual has many roles and reciprocal duties to relatives

outside of the immediate family unit (Nukunya, 1992). This was alluded to by participants in many of the interviews:

*'I think families are actually changing a lot, especially in the villages it's not a problem. In the villages people are still taking care of other people's babies, even the neighbours can take care of the baby. But when it comes to the cities...it is a different story. People say no I also have my problems...'* **Tutaleni [Social Worker]**

Traditionally, in rural areas there was a greater sense of community and extended-family responsibility for the care of children. Whereas for those in cities and towns a reduced sense of community surveillance of children is experienced, with limited opportunities for provision of child care (Weisner *et al.*, 1997). In cities a self-reliant nuclear family arrangement is becoming more common with little community support available. An overwhelming body of literature exists that indicates the emphasis on the group - the idea of communitarianism – and this is indeed a distinct feature of traditional African culture (Sloth-Nielse and Mezmur, 2008). These changing structural patterns were mourned on a range of levels, including parental lack of engagement with schools and the lack of time parents spent with children:

*'The community is so apathetic from what is happening at the school, I am not interested umm we have the African child day...its only for the children. Where did the children come from? Me as the parent, and as we the community must know about it...When you call up parents for instance or the community for involvement...they fold hands or they do not turn up...it's a great concern'.* **Herman [Life Skills Teacher]**

Along with this, there was a sense of erosion and loss of the original community identity and underpinning values which was seen to have been overtaken by a more consumerist Western individualist (Bauman, 2007) approach:

*'As long as this person can have food, smart phones, cell phones, in front of the television those are the things that can build value and put norms in a child, but in our cultures we neglect all of these things to play with the child is very important, to play with the child, to have family meetings to give this child a chance'. Nangura [Teacher]*

For those parents who had access to extended-family care, this was often provided by grandparents. However not all grandparents were fit and well enough to care for young children. As others have noted (Kalomo, 2015) this responsibility can be very onerous for older or frail grandparents when not also supported by the wider community. Parents who left their children with grandparents to work in the city were also seen to be potentially neglectful by participants.

### Teenage Pregnancy

The second key theme, teenage pregnancy, is a major concern for girls of school age, affecting health, social wellbeing and education (Unicef, 2015). Teenage pregnancy was expressed by participants as a common phenomenon in local communities. Nekongo-Nielson and Nchindo (2013) report that 83% of girls dropped out of school in the Kavango region for reasons of teenage pregnancy. Many participants reported that girls under the age of 15 years fall pregnant, with little reference made to the offender. One female teacher explains:

*'I remember last year, were a teenage pregnancy, a grade 6 one, so to me, so it's a 12-year-old'*  
**Helvi [Life Skills Teacher]**

Participants ascribed multiple factors they felt led to the pregnancy of school learners. Practitioners report that communities notice girls to be in a situation of neglect, but will keep silent. A life skills teacher expresses;

*“These people keep quiet, only the time when the girl become pregnant then they complaint, you see it is neglect because parents are allowing wrong things and also the surrounding, people are seeing these things.” Simon [Life Skills Teacher]*

The silence the participants refer to could be because teenage pregnancy is largely seen as a private matter only involving the pregnant adolescent and her immediate family (Lillian and Mumbango, 2015). In the following extract, a teacher expresses that situations of poverty can lead to carers endorsing inappropriate sexual relationships, in return for food or resources, which in turn leads to in-teen pregnancy:

*‘...when you follow the story, you learn that this child was in love with this person for a very long time...People at home, they don’t complain, perhaps the boyfriend gave food to the family members...’ Simon [Life Skills Teacher]*

The need for love, care and affection from care givers could also lead to teenage girl’s involvement in premature sexual relationship. Participants expressed that children not getting love from their parents was a reason to seek love from other sources. A participant narrated the ordeal of a girl in grade 7 (13 years) who was impregnated by a man who was five years older, when she stated:

*‘Her grandmother who raised her passed away...her father also passed away...she is living with her aunties...the aunties are drinking and partying’ Herman [Life Skills Teacher]*

However, many pregnancies in Namibian communities may be the result of forced sex rather than free choice or risky sexual behaviour, normally through early marriages and early sexual debut. The following extract from a life skills teacher laments on the risks of parents exposing their children to sexual relationships:

*'If you really love your child why should you do that, if you really have that heart of your child, and we have to know that in this era...there is HIV, there is sexual transmitted infections and other things, so you are pushing your child, your lovely daughter to get involved in that type of practices and in that vein, they are also losing respect even if they come to school they don't care about school they only cares what they want to do at home with their husbands and boyfriends'. Grace [Life Skills Teacher]*

Marrying of daughters could also be attributed to low levels of education of care givers, conflicting beliefs and values, or absolute poverty which is increasingly becoming a reality for many people in Namibia. Whilst cultural and traditional influences are important and deemed to play a critical role in the moral upbringing of a child, when not applied in the particular manner intended, they can be detrimental to the education of children, especially young girls (Nekongo-Nielsen and Mbukusa, 2013).

### Substance abuse

The final theme in this paper focuses upon elements of parental substance abuse and the subsequent effect upon the nature of care provided to the child. Substance abuse by one or more parents or caregivers was a recurring theme in the majority of interviews, resulting in inadequate levels of care and supervision of children in a range of family settings. Many of the participants revealed that some caregivers from all three regions would spend considerable time at alcohol outlets such as shebeens. The term 'shebeen' refers to an informal licensed drinking place in a township. In some of the northern Namibian communities, drinking places may also be referred to as 'cucashops'. In this study it was evident that parental absence from home because of drinking

alcohol, whilst leaving children without proper supervision, could be a contributing factor to child neglect. One female teacher from the Central region says:

*'What I find is that a lot of children, sometimes their parents come home at 5 o'clock, sometimes they don't come home at because they go drinking, and they are also not at home until tomorrow'* **Helvi [Life Skills Teacher]**

Another male teacher from the same region added:

*'I mean, some of those parents...they don't keep an eye on the children....so, they leave the kids, they don't know where the kids are, they go and drink'* **Nangura [Teacher]**

A parental figure could, however, be perceived to be present and at home, but not playing their part in child-rearing. Participants expressed they felt parents may be consuming alcohol at home and as a result, are not responsive towards their child's daily needs, such as provision of meals or care when the child returns from school. According to WHO's (2011) Global Status Report on Alcohol and Health, Namibia is ranked fifth on the African continent for alcohol consumption. The average Namibian consumes 9.62 litres of alcohol per year often including cheaper traditional brews. Findings of this pilot study highlight the excessive abuse of alcohol and the negative impact this has upon child care within local communities.

When participants were asked to explain the indicators of neglect, the majority highlighted children's physical appearance. Although many factors can explain the untidy presentation of a child during the school day, participants associated the drinking patterns of caregivers directly with

their inability to ensure the child was adequately dressed, clean, and ready for school. One teacher explained how parents drink alcohol from early in the morning;

*'The single mother who is abusing alcohol cannot get up in the morning to provide in the needs of the child and to ensure that the child is neat. Because I went personally to such parents...just to find very early in the morning that the parent is already in a condition of intoxication, and found that the parents are not able to give me any proper explanation why the child is in a condition of neglect' Anna [Relief Teacher]*

Physical appearance can be an indication of child neglect, although some parents do not have the resources to buy the required school uniform. That said, participants report that some parents are spending their resources on alcohol instead of buying appropriate school clothing for their children.

One female life skills teacher stated:

*'My heart just stops because there is always money for a beer but if you see the child coming to school in winter, without even a jersey' Helvi [Life Skills Teacher]*

These findings are consistent with literature identifying parents who are using drugs or alcohol to often prioritise their own need for substances over the basic physical and emotional needs of their children (Calhoun *et al.*, 2015; Smith and Wilson, 2016).

Life skills teachers do not only undertake counselling at the school premises, but also conduct home visits to their learners to assess the home circumstances. A life skills teacher described how their visit to a home would be wasted if parents were found intoxicated, as another visit then had to be scheduled when the parent would be sober. Occasionally, the schools invite parents to a meeting, for a particular discussion around issues that affect their child(ren). In interviews, participants

indicated how some parents turn up to the appointment or formal functions at the school intoxicated. This is exemplified in the following extract:

*'Some parents come drunk when you call them, I mean, then you understand why the child is neglected in the first place. If they are even coming to school drunk, 7 'o' clock in the morning'*  
**Sonia [Life Skills Teacher]**

In addition to poor levels of supervision for children and high levels of parental intoxication, participants also expressed concern over the presence of shebeens and cucashops in residential areas. Such drinking places negatively affect the nature and manner of care a child receives, as participants' report parents prioritising time at drinking establishments instead of time with their children. Participants expressed that children were exhausted and struggled to concentrate in school because the shebeens were operating within the communities from the morning hours until late at night. One female life skills teacher states:

*'Having shebeens in the residential areas is really a concern, you should just see how the children are able to dance, because they are living next to the shebeens. Children are sleeping in the classrooms, and are not concentrating well...That is why I would take a picture of a child at a shebeen, go to the parent and show the picture...Sometimes the house where the child lives also is a shebeen, and the child cannot sleep peacefully at night'* **Anna [Relief Teacher]**

According to participants in this study, school attendance of children is affected, with high levels of non-attendance at schools in favour of time spent at shebeens during school hours. It appears that the absent parental figure also contributes to children visiting shebeens, as there is no parent or

carer to supervise the age-appropriate movements of their children. Babies and toddlers may equally be exposed to inadequate levels of care due to substance abuse by their caregiver, with participants highlighting mothers taking newly born babies into bars or drinking establishments on their backs and becoming intoxicated.

Whilst alcohol is a legal substance it seems from the findings that illegal substances are also used by some parents and caregivers in the presence of children and may even introduce these substances to their children. It was also revealed in this study that some parents are also involved in the selling of illegal drugs. One female life skills teacher states:

*'I hear about using crack in front of the child, the child describes to me what its smells like, offering [it to] the child'. Helvi [Life Skills Teacher]*

Findings from the study provided insights into how some parents live in abject poverty and have no means of income to provide for the needs of their children. That said, many participants also indicated that some parents would receive an income from either employment, child maintenance payments from an absent parent, or the child welfare grant from the State. Participants talked about parents instantly spending their income on alcohol on the day their salaries were paid. A social worker reports:

*'I see a lot of neglect on a regular basis, but especially after a weekend of month end, I see very high incidences of neglect. Parents would have received their salaries and end up drinking instead of taking care of their children' Maria [Social Worker]*

The Namibian government provides a child welfare grant to parents who have very little financial resources to provide in the upbringing of the child. Participants have indicated that some parents who are recipients of the state grant, often spend monies on alcoholic drinks instead of responding to the child's basic needs. In the following extract a life skills teacher exemplifies this point:

*'The maintenance grant of 250 NAM dollar has contributed much more to the alcohol abuse of the parents. That money is used for alcohol, people uses the maintenance grant to drink alcohol for two days'. Anna [Relief Teacher]*

Even though the mismanagement of child welfare grants was highlighted by many of the participants, there were also instances where the money was used to alleviate poverty and improve children's conditions. The findings of this study are supported by a number of studies into the misuse of state grants (Ministry of Gender Equality and Child Welfare, 2010; Khosa and Kaseke, 2017) which although confirm the misuse of the grant, also highlight its value as the only source of income many households will receive, positively contributing towards providing for the basic needs of Namibian children.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has presented three themes from interviews undertaken in schools and with social workers across three ethnically and linguistically diverse regions in Namibia. The data provide rich insights into the conceptualisation of child neglect in both contexts. Interviews were framed around understandings of children's basic needs and explored participants thoughts, feelings and

experiences of identifying and responding to child neglect in their individual roles. Traditional child-rearing patterns, teenage pregnancy, substance misuse, all emerged as consequences of inadequate supervision and care of children in a range of family settings and were embedded within participants' constructions of child neglect in the local context.

A key tension arose in the data between Western and indigenous frameworks of knowing, a disconnect between the schools' curriculum and its cultural relevance to pupils from a range of indigenous groups (Semali, 2002). That said, variance was also present within and between each region. Some of these disconnects arose from divergent cultural norms and expectations within differing communities across Namibia and its bordering countries, whilst some were from ongoing urbanisation and Westernisation where families no longer relied upon traditional structures of support, and old value systems. Interestingly, participants advocated for a need to return to traditional values and for a more community-based, integrated approach to child-rearing practice, positioning education as the key delivery partner in their communities.

The divide between traditional child-rearing practices where a wider community takes care of a child (Wusu and Isiugo-Abanihe, 2003; Brown, 2011; Neingo, 2012), and a more individualised nuclear family responsibility for parenting (Levine *et al.*, 1994), is proposed as contributing to the problem of children falling between the gaps and fractures of the two colliding systems. In terms of understanding children's needs and the issue of child neglect in Namibia, findings raise questions about existing frameworks as not wholly relevant, nor wholly effective in practice delivery, nor

entirely sufficient in social work practice education or delivery (Gray *et al.*, 2010; Osei-Hwedie and Rankopo, 2010).

Realisable implications for social work practice relate to working to increase knowledge about and assisting with child registrations, so all children have citizenship and entitlements in accordance with the UNCRC. Social workers could usefully introduce culturally sensitive parenting programmes; engagement with alcohol education and harm reduction would be an important focus. In addition, issues of teenage pregnancy could be addressed by life skills teachers educating learners on sexual and reproductive health.

Historically, social work has introduced Westernised-thinking into developing countries through the process of colonisation, 'silencing' indigenous voices in the process and disregarding local wisdom and knowledge (Gray *et al.*, 2010, p1). The demand for localised social work practice and education is a well-versed discussion which supports the development of fitting and culturally-relevant approaches, congruent with a country's social, political, and economic contexts (Mupedziswa, 1992; Someli, 2002). Understandings of and responses to child neglect in Namibia, must be congruent with the societal context in which children exist (Ferguson, 2005; Osei-Hwedie and Rankopo, 2010), such as health, poverty and inequality.

It is important to recognise that Namibia is already committed to reducing poverty and the effects of poverty, through initiatives such as the social grants, food banks, school feeding programmes and free primary and secondary education. Because the definition of child neglect only becomes 'professionally useful' when it considers the role of the definer, time period and legal framework in which it is created, and the broader socio-political context in which it is shaped (Rose and Selwyn, 2000, p181), further indigenous understanding on this complex issue is needed from the culturally and linguistically diverse communities in Namibia. **For this reason,** the authors call for a larger-scale, community-based participatory study (Brydon-Miller and Maguire, 2009) to draw upon local ways of knowing to advance practice knowledge and understanding about what constitutes child neglect in the local context.

Whilst it is acknowledged that this study is small in scale (n=15), findings offer new and important insights into preliminary understandings about what is considered neglectful parenting. The data provide a valuable foundation from which future investigation into children's needs within traditional child fosterage frameworks, so as to gather understanding about children within their unique contexts and relationships. The authors advocate for a participatory action research study (Brydon-Miller and Maguire, 2009) that works with local stakeholders, and families within the community to design the research, gather data from a culturally-relevant perspective, and critically engage with existing Western conceptions of child neglect (Laird, 2016a) that bring challenges to local practice.

With the purpose of responding to issues of power and inequality, future investigation will be underpinned by involvement from a range of local communities, to ensure a context-specific and innovative approach is the organising principle (Osei-Hwedie and Rankopo, 2010). Findings of a larger-scale study have potential to inform and develop the skills and knowledge of local practitioners, to respond to child neglect more effectively. This will aim to improve the overall health, development and wellbeing of Namibian children in congruence with the responsibilities set out in the UNCRC (1989), African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (2004), and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (2018: SDGs2/3/4), for reducing hunger (in cases of nutritional neglect) and delivering quality and lifelong education (for both children and practitioners).

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