Most of us picture a conventional classroom with desks, chairs, and a blackboard when we hear the word school. It is not the case for many children in Namibia who have never been inside a proper classroom. This does not mean though they do not go to school.

More than 2,500 children in the area north west of Opuwo in the Kunene region are part of a very special and unique school, known as the mobile school. It is registered as one school with a principal and three department heads, but consists of 30 units spread out all over the region. Instead of conventional, permanent school buildings, the units consist of tents, which are used as classrooms. The learners eat on fold-up camp stools at fold-up tables. There is a portable blackboard, while posters and pictures can be stuck on the walls, but hang from a line like washing.

The idea is to make the school as flexible as possible to fit in with the nomadic lifestyle of the Ovahimba and Ovamboba people in the region. The units can therefore be packed up and moved to a new location whenever the communities have to move to find new water or grazing for their livestock.

Units are also flexible with their school hours to fit in with household tasks, such as herding cattle or fetching water, the learners have to perform at home. When parents tell us they need the children at home in the morning for herding duties, we start school later," a teacher at Ovahimba (north of Okweape), Bastar Tjipombo told the Youthpaper. He is one of two teachers at Ovahimba teaching 33 learners from Grades 1 to 6.

According to Katajari Kamwi, regional director for education in Kunene, the programme started with six units in 1998. Today there are 30 units with 73 teachers and about 2,500 children.

The programme ties in with government's policy to provide education for marginalized children. "It was always a problem to capture the Ovahimba and Ovamboba children," said Kamwi. The Norwegian government was interested in the policy to provide equitable access to schooling for all children and provided the money for a feasibility study in 1993. The mobile school programme was launched in 1998 with the Namibia Association of Norway (Namas) as a partner.

According to Kamwi, the agreement runs out in 2005 when government will take over completely. At the moment Namas pays half of the teachers' salaries.

Transport... in the remote parts of the Kunene region vehicle transport is a luxury, so are telephones or even electricity. For many the only means of transport is a donkey. This 11-year-old girl is being taken to school on the back of one. She has to travel about 30 km to get to the school at Ojikandemirengo, which is about 50 km northwest of Oshikunene.
REQUESTS... While the children are fortunate to have a school close to home, they do not have the luxury of libraries or any other extra educational facilities. The learners had some requests, including pens, shoes and books to read.

Kasinge Tiambua (third from right), asked for books specifically on animals and plants. Linda Baker (right) of the IRDNC donated a bird book and a bee book to the unit for the learners to get to know their environment better.

trophy hunting which would bring financial benefits to the community. Euphresius Dawids, senior field officer of the IRDNC said it was very exciting to take the learners on these trips. It is great to see them coming out of their shells. These trips broaden their horizons so much as they duties at home any more. In many cases children lost their traditions.

The chairperson of the Gupembibe conservancy, Urparue Tjiririgre, feels it is a good thing that he has two children finish Grade 12 and get a further education. He said he would love to see one child far away to school. Maria Mupurea, who serves on the Gupembibe conservancy committee, feels it is a good thing that her son is going to school. She wants him to finish Grade 12. She said it was not a problem that he was at school, because she had another child at home to help with the duties. "He is not interested to attend school," she said. She wants her daughter to also go to school one day.

So far many more boys attend school than girls. The split is 70 to 30 per cent between boys and girls. Kamwi did not want to speculate on the reasons for this. The teacher at Onyuva said it was either that many girls were not interested in school, or the parents did not send them. The three girls at Onyuva were very enthusiastic about their studies.

According to the regional director proof of the success of the programme is the tremendous growth in units from six to 32. "We are very pleased with the success. The communities has definitely become more open to the idea of school." While the mobility of the units has presented some problems, such as a settlement splitting in two when moving to a new location, Kamwi said they had to keep on being flexible. On the other hand there is a move to make some schools permanent. About six of the units are no longer housed in tents. At Pumes and Ojijungu,a Raleigh International has helped to build permanent classrooms. "We are trying to make the units conform to conventional schools as much as possible as we do not want to offer a second class education to these children," said Kamwi.

Whether they sit in tents on fold-up chairs, or whether they have upgraded to a conventional classroom, the children in the Kunene have proved it is possible to be educated no matter what the circumstances are.

- Maggi Barnard

OUR SCHOOL... Some of the 36 learners in front of their classroom at the Onyuva mobile school Unit. The rest of the school went to play soccer at Opuwa on the day the Youthpaper visited. At the back is their teacher, Bastar Tjimombo.