

Education: The key to success in Bhutan

With a population of just around three-quarters of a million people, Bhutan has made great strides in its creation of a better environment for its people. While still a monarchy in some ways, a constitution was adopted in 2008, providing a democratic element to its government and paving a way for sustainable development.

Education has been on the forefront of Bhutan's sustainable growth with 6.9 percent of GDP allocated toward education, ranking 17th highest in the world (UNESCO, 2020).ⁱ As a kingdom under a democratic monarchy for only 13 years, much of its foundation has only recently been developed, but is a testament to its dedication to success. With political openness and educational policy development, Bhutan has been able to greatly impact a variety of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The Beginning

To understand the success of education in this land-locked country, it is important to understand how recent its inception is within the "Land of the Thunder Dragon." While the first record of education was in 1914, it was still restricted to an elite group of only 49 students by 1920 and it was not until 1961 when the First Five Year Plan was created, and a national education system was developed. Coincidentally, this development occurred during the same time the British were bringing Nepalese into Southern Bhutan to work in the rice fields. With a growing population of immigrants, the Nepalese began to operate private schools for their own community, replicating the structure from their home countries in a bottom-up approach. With the Bhutanese schools, the development did not occur because of local need, rather government oversight and a top-down approach, thus causing a bit more resistance in its growth. Additionally, a new challenge was introduced as the official language in school was Hindi, not Dzongkha, the most common language; the likely reason in the need to understand Hindi in order to pursue secondary and tertiary education in India, its economically tied neighboring country (Hirayama, T., 2013).ⁱⁱ

The educational system has developed significantly in the last half of the 21st century, including the introduction of a university system. However, two key aspects impact its success of providing a diverse liberal arts approach. Each college within the system is located in different parts of the country, preventing a broad approach to academia. Additionally, "critical-thinking" had been suggested as being a curse to Bhutanese culture, perhaps a result of its long-standing monarchical political structure (Rennie, F. & Mason, R., 2007).ⁱⁱⁱ

During the 1960's, a traditional method of teaching was used that focused on memorization and lacked "a systematic and graduated approach." However modern methods began to be integrated, particularly when Bhutan began to open its borders internationally in 1971 with joining the United Nations. With scholars returning to Bhutan and information becoming more accessible, a modern educational system gained traction by the early 1980's. Acceptance of this new form, however, took years to trickle down through the rural monastic communities who were viewed by the modernists as "non-productive consumers and as social parasites hinder the material progress of the nation" (Phuntsho, K., 2000).^{iv}

Over the next twenty-five years, Bhutan created different government departments to focus on specific initiatives like the Curriculum and Textbook Development Division (CTDD) in 1985, the New Approach to Primary Education (NAPE) in 1986 which replaced foreign content with local relevancy and the Curriculum and Professional Support Sections (CAPSS) under the Ministry of Health & Education. Not until 2003 did the Ministry of Education become a standalone department with a comprehensive department called the Royal Education Council (REC) finally launching in 2014 (Royal Education Council, n.d.).^v

Policy Overview

Bhutan is unique in that “Gross National Happiness” (GNH) takes precedent over Gross National Product (GNP) and dictates state policy. The GNH policy is structured by four pillars, including: Good governance; Sustainable and equitable development; Environmental conservation; and Cultural promotion. There are 33 indicators under nine domains including: Psychological well-being; Standard of living; Good governance; Time use; Health; Education; Community vitality; Cultural diversity and resilience; and Ecological diversity (Centre for Bhutan Studies & GNH Research, 2016).^{vi} This over-arching concept of happiness guides all policy development from national to regional and local.

Bhutan’s unique cultural traditions are integrated throughout its educational system from daily school assemblies with singing and prayer, learning about environmental sustainability all while wearing uniforms of traditional Bhutanese style. In 2014, with support from UNICEF and Save the Children, Bhutan focused on early childhood care development (ECCD), particularly with early stimulation of infants and toddlers through healthcare centers, the private sector and NGOs, sound parenting practices and improving primary school learning techniques (Ball, J. & Wangchuck, K. C., 2015).^{vii}

The focus on early childhood development to create a more educated society has a priority, particularly with the female population. The literacy rate gap has significantly decreased and is now 93 percent for both males and females between 15 and 24 years of age; while it is just 57 percent for females and 75 percent for males for people above the age of 15 (UNESCO, 2017).^{viii} This success will prove beneficial for the entire country as educated girls “make greater contributions to their country’s economic productivity and growth (Jonker, K., 2010).”^{ix}

However, it is important to note that studies show a variety of social services should be factored into education, which includes school supplies, transportation costs, nutrition and parental outreach (Shafiq, M. N., 2010).^x In fact, much of the success in Bhutan has been a result of the policies within its educational system including that of parental and community involvement, a recent change within the cultural of Bhutan. Within the Standards for Inclusive Education, it states that schools will collaborate with parents to support children with special needs, create a forum for parental and community input on policies and for school leadership to actively involve all families and coordination with ECCD centers (Jigyel, K. 2019).^{xi}

To help with the social side, in 2013, the King appointed Bhutan’s first female minister to lead Works & Human Settlement. Minister Dorji Choden quickly expanded a previous initiative through the World Food Programme, one in which she benefited from as a child. This program

now feeds nearly half of the country's children through the school meals with an additional 30,000 children located in rural areas to be included soon (WFP Asia & Pacific, 2019).^{xii}

Challenges

However, this same year, 2013, June Gordan, with the Department of Education at the University of California – Santa Cruz, published a qualitative assessment of the challenges within the modernizing educational system in Bhutan after having extensively researched Asian cultures and schooling. With over a hundred interviews, key findings were provided to the REC at their request to make improvements (Gordan, J., 2013).^{xiii}

Teacher morale was low due to static infrastructure development, a suggested result of political issues. This was compounded by little desire to become a teacher as many obtained their role by circumstance, versus interest; with a pessimistic future as no children had a desire to pursue education as a profession. Due to the geography of the region, many teachers were in remote locations, some acting in multiple roles including principal and possibly sole teacher for all grades. As a known issue, the Bhutan government created a policy of 'teacher rotation,' whereby the teachers would switch schools every three years. This was a controversial mandate as it broke up families and with varying curriculum or infrastructure in rural areas, reduced any incentive to be creative in their teaching style. Lastly, a Civil Service exam policy was implemented, which was not necessarily indicative of a person's ability to work with children. Educators began at the same level regardless of personal educational background or lack thereof; meaning someone who had their masters was paid the same as someone who just finished high school, thus removing any incentive to have higher qualified educators in the system (Gordan, 2013).

While there have been various departments to facilitate a curriculum, the focus has been on conducting cognitive skill-based lessons (REC, 2009).^{xiv} By simply teaching toward a grade versus a concept, especially inclusion of new ideas and thoughts, the outcomes for potential are finite. One study stated, "The Bhutanese curriculum prioritizes academic achievement over other non-cognitive skills and that it indicates a curriculum drive by economic social efficiency, at the cost of what may seem as lesser lucrative skills" (Schuelka, M., Sherab, K. & Yangzome, Nidup, T., 2018).^{xv}

Infrastructure is becoming a greater issue in a country that has placed emphasis on increasing the number of children within the educational system. Overcrowding appears to be the biggest challenge as parents send their children to live with relatives to attend school in more urban areas, which have better teachers and greater access to tools. In some schools, nearly 30% of the children were 'indirect dependents' of an urban resident. In turn, these schools are unable to handle the quantity and the rural schools are dying with one school only having nine students. The classroom settings did not always provide a conducive atmosphere to learning with dark rooms and cold clay floors. Some schools were allegedly cleaned by its own students while others did not have adequate waste management facilities. A lack of supplies plagued many schools and electricity blackouts hindered the use of some learning materials (Gordan, 2013).

Additional challenges include those of migrant youth, particularly ones whose parents were working on building the National Road System. As the adults moved to new areas, the children

were forced to move to new schools. Children with special needs struggle to adapt in somewhat chaotic situations of schooling, not to mention the need to properly identify who and what special needs may be required to help them (Gordan, 2013).

While participation from parents has been included in the educational policies, these come with its own set of challenges such as language barriers, socio-economic status, availability to participate and the family composition (Graham-Clay, S, 2005).^{xvi} However, perhaps the greatest challenge with parental support is cultural, with the tradition of respecting the expertise of teachers and not questioning or wanting to provide feedback on their teaching process (Jigyel, K. et al., 2018).^{xvii}

Success

Even with challenges presented in the education system, Bhutan has made drastic improvements to the society particularly key aspects that had made it a “Least Developed Country.” Between 2004 and 2017, there has been a reduction in poverty by 23.5 percent to 8.2 percent and only 1.6 percent living in extreme poverty (Wangchuck, 2018).^{xviii} As of 2018, Bhutan is ‘on track’ to achieve 16 of the 17 SDGs, with only Partnerships for the Goals at risk. Life expectancy is up from 37 years in 1960 to 70 years in 2014, supported with free basic healthcare. Ninety-nine percent of people have access to improved water sources and electricity, and more than half of the country is protected in the form of national parks and wildlife sanctuaries. Within education as outlined in the *Sustainable Development and Happiness: Bhutan’s Voluntary National Review Report on the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, the success of SDG #4 (Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning to all) is showcased with a net primary enrollment rate of 98.8 percent and a retention of 95 percent between primary school and the last year, grade twelve (Royal Government of Bhutan, 2018).^{xix} However the greatest success for Bhutan is quickly approaching with the United Nations indicating that the country will graduate from being a “least developed country” on December 13, 2023 (United Nations, 2021).^{xx}

ⁱ UNESCO. (Sept. 2020). Government expenditure on education. *The World Bank*. Retrieved from https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.XPD.TOTL.GD.ZS?locations=BT&most_recent_value_desc=true

ⁱⁱ Hirayama, T. (2013). Type and the Contrastive Characteristics of Modern School in Bhutan in the 1940s and 1950s. *Journal of International Education*, 19, pp. 42-59.

ⁱⁱⁱ Rennie, F. & Mason, R. (March 2007). The Development of Distributed Learning Techniques in Bhutan and Nepal. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, Vol. 8, Number 1, pp. 1-11.

^{iv} Phuntsho, K. (Winter 2000). On the Two Ways of Learning in Bhutan. *Journal of Bhutan Studies* 2:2, pp. 96-126.

^v Royal Education Council. (n.d.) About Us. *Kingdom of Bhutan*. Retrieved from <https://rec.gov.bt/background>

^{vi} Centre for Bhutan Studies & GNH Research. (2016). A Compass Towards a Just and Harmonious Society. *Royal Government of Bhutan*. Retrieved from <http://www.grossnationalhappiness.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Final-GNH-Report-jp-21.3.17-ilovepdf-compressed.pdf>

^{vii} Ball, J., & Wangchuck, K. C. (2015) Using a policy of ‘gross national happiness to guide the development of sustainable early learning programs in the Kingdom of Bhutan: aspirations and challenges. *Global Education Review*, 2 (1), pp. 5-22.

^{viii} UNESCO (n.d.) Bhutan Literacy Rate. *UNESCO*. Retrieved from <http://uis.unesco.org/en/country/bt>

^{ix} Jonker, K. (2010). Strength through Flexibility. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Winter 2010, pp. 68-71.

^x Shafiq, M. N. (2010). Designing targeted educational voucher schemes for the poor in developing countries. *International Review of Education*, 56 (1), pp. 33-50.

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- ^{xi} Jigyel, K. et al. (2019). Parental involvement in supporting their children with special education needs at school and home in Bhutan. *Australasian Journal of Special Education*, 43 (1), pp. 54-68.
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- ^{xiv} REC. (2009). The quality of school education in Bhutan: Reality and Opportunities. *Thimphu: Royal Government of Bhutan*.
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