

Conclusion: Key Outcomes, Challenges, Ways Forward, and Future Research

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Abstract This chapter reviews the major outcomes in Bhutan's education system. For example, the development of the primary sector, where Millennium Development Goals have largely been met, is ahead of the secondary and tertiary sectors where considerable progress has been made in a remarkably short period of time but more needs to be done. This chapter also sets out the major challenges and points to potential ways forward. For example, several challenges are identified for the successful implementation of Educating for Gross National Happiness but we also present ways that these might be addressed. Research, and educational research in particular, is wide open for future research and some suggestions are made.

Introduction

Education has a long history in Bhutan starting from the early Buddhist scholars in classical Tibetan many centuries ago. Buddhist education established the laws, social conduct, traditions, and learned thought not just in the *lakhangs* [temples], *gomba* [monasteries], and *shedra* [monastic schools] scattered throughout Bhutan, but throughout Bhutanese society. This monastic tradition has continued alongside the secular education system, but it is the latter that has become dominant – or at least more available – to the girls and boys of Bhutan. The shift in the place of learning and the democratization of knowledge has produced fundamental changes in Bhutanese society. From the early twentieth century when the first secular schools came into existence in Bhutan, and more particularly over the last half century, there has been a revolution in the shape of Bhutanese education. This book has been about this revolution.

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What are the key outcomes? What are the challenges and potential ways forward? What research might be undertaken to shed light on the different sectors to chart new directions for development? These are the questions that we will address in this chapter.

Key Outcomes

In fifty years, Bhutan has established a secular education system. This is an extraordinary outcome given the short period of time. Schools have been built, teachers educated, curricula designed, and materials published. Moreover, the curriculum, the teaching materials, the assessment, and the staffing were ‘Bhutanized’ as a result of decades of careful planning guided by the Fourth *Druk Gyalpo* [Dragon King] (Tshering Tashi and Maxwell 2015). In 1990, at the Education For All (EFA) conference in Jomtien, Thailand, universal primary education must have appeared a long way off to Bhutanese delegates. However, this EFA outcome, now a Millennium Development Goal, has largely been achieved by 2015.

The Gross Primary Enrollment Ratio (GPER) for Bhutan has increased from 55% in 1990 to 118% in 2012, which shows an average growth of 4.0% per year. Bhutan’s Net Gross Primary Enrollment Ratio (NPER) in 2012 was also increased to 95.60%. According to the Ministry of Education, around 1% of 6–12 year old children are studying abroad and around 2% of the 6–12 year olds are enrolled in monastic institutions. (UNDP Bhutan 2015)

The pressure is on the secondary sector to build upon the foundations provided by universal primary education in the country. It is clear that more places are needed in Classes XI and XII in government schools. However, the policy has been to allow the development of private schools to take up the slack in parents’ desire for their children to have a senior high school education. Clearly parents want their children to have a quality senior high school experience. At present, government schools are preferred. This means that parents who pay the fees for tuition at private schools, and government accountability systems, need to put pressure on these schools to build the quality of their children’s schooling.

In stark contrast to the present day, many Bhutanese found themselves outside the ‘education system’ of the early decades. This recognition led to the important non-formal education (NFE) programme. As T.S. Powdyel (chapter “[Non-Formal Education in Bhutan: Origin, Evolution, and Impact](#)”, this volume) has indicated, NFE has brought much to many of these citizens. Again, it was the Fourth *Druk Gyalpo* who drove this development through the articulation of the first written form of education policy in which one of the objectives was to teach as many people as possible reading, writing, and numeracy as a way to enable many more Bhutanese to participate meaningfully in all avenues of society (RGoB 1981). It seems likely that this kind of objective would have assisted the initiation and subsequent development of this internationally recognised programme.

Another group that was not given provision, in the early days of education in Bhutan, was children with disabilities. Buddhist monastic education was largely a place of homogenous student ability (Zangley Dukpa, chapter “[The History and Development of Monastic Education in Bhutan](#)”, this volume), and the type of early secular education being imported from India also promoted competitive means in which to promote homogenous ableism in schools. The rise of global discourse around EFA, human rights education, child-friendly, and inclusive schools has also permeated into Bhutan – albeit somewhat erratically (Schuelka 2013; 2015). Promoting quality education for *all* children, regardless of ability, has become a priority and is a good fit with other philosophical priorities such as Educating for GNH and the *Education Blueprint 2014–2024* (MoE 2014a). This will be challenging in many areas, not least of which is providing adequate pre-service teacher training for students with disabilities (Rinchen Dorji and Schuelka, chapter “[Children with Disabilities in Bhutan: Transitioning from Special Educational Needs to Inclusive Education](#)”, this volume).

A third group of under-served children in the early days of education were the pre-schoolers. Early childhood care and development (ECCD) is relatively new in Bhutan. The discussions of some two decades ago have bloomed slowly with the support of the private sector such that now ECCD centres are not uncommon in most towns and cities in Bhutan. Only very recently have policies been developed and resources set aside for ECCD (see Tshering Wangmo and Brooks, chapter “[Early Childhood Care and Development in Bhutan: Mind the Gap\(s\)](#)”, this volume).

An important outcome has been the introduction of two universities in Bhutan. There are also several private tertiary institutions. While the oldest university is only 12 years old in 2015, the tertiary tradition was started more than 40 years ago at Sherubtse College in Tashigang (see Schofield, chapter “[Higher Education in Bhutan: Progress and Challenges](#)”, this volume). Sherubtse College aside, the early colleges were concerned with providing workers for the various ministries to which they were attached and they did not develop research capacity. This is quite understandable given the modernization developments required of Bhutan during those times. The two education colleges in particular have worked hard to produce graduates that were essential for the development of the primary and secondary school sectors. Similarly, the education of nurses has been a priority over time and has meant the development of allopathic hospitals and basic health units. Traditional medicine has been placed upon a sound footing (see Phurpa Wangchuk, Tempa Gyeltshen, and Tashi Tobgay, chapter “[Bhutanese Traditional Medical Education](#)”, this volume).

The tertiary colleges, and now the universities, and the education sector generally, have received financial and material support from outside Bhutan. India in the early days targeted basic needs in education: school buildings, teachers, and teaching materials. Subsequently, the UN and other forms of multi-lateral support have targeted areas that were needed as the system developed (see Jagar Dorji, chapter “[International Influence and Support for Educational Development in Bhutan](#)”, this volume). A good example of this was the UNICEF support of the development

of the multi-grade teaching/learning strategy (Kucita et al. 2013) and the corresponding multi-lateral and community in-kind support of the building of schools and teacher housing high in the mountains (Maxwell 2001, 2012a).

However, international support has not been without its problems as outside ideas were introduced. Perhaps the best example of this was in education where the introduction of the New Approach to Education (NAPE) (see Singye Namgyel and Phub Rinchen, chapter “[History and Transition of Secular Education in Bhutan from the Twentieth into the Twenty-First Century](#)”, this volume) created difficulties in the 1980s and 1990s. The progressive ideas associated with NAPE were probably introduced at least two decades too early as most in the teaching cadre were not able to implement them (Jagar Dorji 2005). There is an important lesson here: a system-wide initiative needs to be introduced at the level where the majority of teachers are able to comprehend its key ideas and be able, or be assisted, to translate these into classroom practices (Beeby 1966). System-wide pressure and support is essential (Fullan 2007). These require a commitment to change, translated into systemic funding over time to undertake the necessary materials development and teacher in-service. Moreover, not all schools are at the same stage of professional development so the initiative has to be handled carefully at the local level (Maxwell and Namgay 2014). Institutional leadership is also essential (Fullan 2014). These ideas are particularly relevant to the present introduction of Educating for Gross National Happiness where continued support will be required (see below).

Support has flowed into Bhutan since the 1st Five-Year Plan began in 1961 because Bhutan’s officials have been largely un-corruptible. This is quite unusual for this part of the world. Countries and NGOs have had confidence in investing in Bhutan. Jagar Dorji (chapter “[International Influence and Support for Educational Development in Bhutan](#)”, this volume) has shown how important to the development of education this material support has been from a wide range of donors. This lack of corruption is likely to remain because of the current strength of the Anti-Corruption Commission. Bhutan’s education system has benefitted greatly from this situation in the past but may be less likely to do so in the future. The reason for this is simple: Bhutan has reached, or is within reach, of its Millennium Development Goals whereas many countries, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, have a long way to go to reach theirs. This means that donors will switch their funding to needier areas if they have not already done so.

Challenges and Potential Ways Forward

Perhaps the greatest challenge facing the secular education system is the integration of the Educating for GNH (EGNH) initiative into the curriculum. As Kezang Sherab, Maxwell, and Cooksey (chapter “[Teacher Understanding of the Educating for Gross National Happiness Initiative](#)”, this volume) noted, a good start has already been made in some schools. Pema Tshomo (chapter “[Conditions of](#)

[Happiness: Bhutan’s Educating for Gross National Happiness Initiative and the Capability Approach](#)”, this volume) provided a theoretical framework for EGNH by integrating it with the capability approach. The argument of Pema Thinley (chapter [“Overview and ‘Heart Essence’ of the Bhutanese Education System”](#)”, this volume) was to make mindfulness education an essential part of the curriculum. After-school activities, akin to EGNH, have been undertaken for more than a decade but they tend to be somewhat elitist, that is, for those with special talents and interests rather than for the student population as a whole.

At the heart of the challenge is the dominance of the external assessment regime in Bhutanese secular schools. Classroom teachers, it seems, are reticent to take time away from examinable subject content to focus more on EGNH outcomes. There appears to be four potential ways forward:

- Integrate EGNH outcomes tacitly or implicitly into lessons at all levels. This would mean harnessing the hidden curriculum. This would not require a policy change but rather changes in teacher practices with long term attention to related capacity building and teacher education as indicated by Kezang Sherab, Maxwell, and Cooksey (chapter [“Teacher Understanding of the Educating for Gross National Happiness Initiative”](#)”, this volume). This focus on EGNH capacity building may require a policy shift where the capacity building takes place over time rather than assumed to be effective after being addressed through a single course;
- Assessment driven curriculum change. For example, Pema Thinley’s (chapter [“Overview and ‘Heart Essence’ of the Bhutanese Education System”](#)”, this volume) ideas about mindfulness education could be taken to their logical conclusion: create mindfulness education as a subject included in the formal curriculum and consequently be formally assessed. To be formally assessed means that EGNH is seen to be valued. This would require a policy change by the Ministry of Education (MoE). This is an important curriculum issue: to create a new subject or not to do so. This would be a debate worth having. The Bhutan Council for School Examinations and Assessment (BCSEA) would then face its own challenges in implementing policy;
- Use a combination of both strategies; or
- Dismantle national assessment.

The latter would be the preference for many progressives, but the third option would be more practical and realistic.

The first option implies that teachers would become more aware of the impact of the hidden curriculum and its impact on student learning. Curriculum scholars think of the ‘hidden curriculum’ as learning that was not openly intended. Typically, such learning includes the transmission of norms, values, and beliefs conveyed in the classroom and the social environment usually in tacit ways. Hidden curriculum learning is not planned but students learn these outcomes through their experiences of classroom processes. Some of these were illustrated in Kezang Sherab, Maxwell and Cooksey (chapter [“Teacher Understanding of the Educating for Gross National Happiness Initiative”](#)”, this volume). What we are implying here is that teachers

become aware of the impact of the tacit learning in their classrooms and translate this into positive outcomes associated with EGNH. Were teachers to attend to this issue then they would necessarily have to learn about critical reflection and/or action research on their own behaviour in the classroom and make changes over time consistent with EGNH principles.

The second option would give a strong message to classroom teachers. If EGNH is assessed then it must be important and given time in the formal curriculum. This would then tie in nicely with teachers' own learning about the importance of the hidden curriculum in teaching EGNH outcomes (option 1 above). Staff of the teacher education colleges, and teachers in model schools such as provided by The Royal Academy in Paro, will also need to address the issues pointed to above. This is especially so given their role in teacher education in the country. If system-wide assessment is to stay, and this is most likely, then the combination of options 1 and 2 provide a way forward. However, as we argued in the previous section, system-wide and institutional level leadership, pressure and support are essential if EGNH is going to have an impact.

The idea of EGNH brings with it another challenge. Zangley Dukpa (chapter "The History and Development of Monastic Education in Bhutan", this volume) pointed out: "Both Buddhism and GNH are premised on the principles of love, compassion, contentment, and also the balanced development of mind and body or harmonization of capitalism and communism economic models." The implication is clear. Secular education may have quite a bit to learn from monastic education. The challenge is for the two sectors to talk to one another. EGNH provides a bridge here and monastic education may well have a role to play in terms of the processes of learning how to operationalise EGNH, that is, of practices that assist in the implementation of mindfulness in everyday life.

There are other challenges apart from those associated with EGNH. School financing and the provision of adequate resources is a key issue. The success of enrolment in primary has meant pressure has been placed on student access, space and teachers at the secondary level. Such pressures are exacerbated by the current government's plans to enhance secondary enrolments (MoE 2014a).

Yet another challenge is in the area of language learning. Dzongkha and English are the languages of instruction. Neither of these languages is the home language for many children. They are thus at a considerable disadvantage compared to children from families who speak either language, but especially English as most subjects are taught in English. Although Dorji Thinley and Maxwell (2013) made a strong case that English can assist in cultural preservation, this is not the point. To make a simple explanation: learning generally begins with the known, and builds from that. However, what is known is articulated in words. What if the learner does not understand the words? There is little to build upon. Moreover, grammar and other features of the new language are different. An international review of second language learning by young people found:

There is clear evidence that Indigenous children with some proficiency in English on entry to school have generally better educational outcomes than those with little or no knowledge of English. Similarly, children who commence school with a wider vocabulary and profi-

ciency in their first language have generally better literacy development than students with less well developed early language skills (Silburn et al. 2011, p. 47).

We observe that the issues raised here are generally not well understood in Bhutan. Attention to them in terms of policy and classroom practices would address important equity issues.

Another key challenge is the common problem of aligning student outcomes with positive economic goals. Consistent with the GNH policy, and EGNH in schools, such an alignment would not want to overwhelm but rather complement EGNH outcomes. The danger is that even if the curriculum was aligned in this way the power of the external assessment system, accompanied by teacher customs and practices, such outcomes associated with economic goals will overshadow EGNH goals (see above). Nevertheless, there are strong arguments for curriculum reform recognised by the MoE (2014a), which has acknowledged that the secondary curriculum is largely academic in nature and has identified the need for vocational education. More specifically, Ueda (chapter “[Rural Life and Modern Formal Schooling in Bhutan](#)”, this volume), for instance, pointed out the dislocation between the reality of students in rural areas and what they learned in school.

Supporting rural schools is another challenge. A major acknowledgement in educational development in Bhutan was the recognition in the early 1990s that access to schools had previously been denied to children in remote areas. Community schools were built and teaching carried out using multi-grade classes (Maxwell 2012a) and these were having a positive effect. Kucita et al. (2013, p. 210) showed that

It is apparent that considerable benefits have come to rural and remote communities in terms of their children’s access to education. However, consistent with the world over, there are considerable challenges to be overcome. Chief amongst these are the lack of adequate resources including the timely adjustment to the aligned curriculum and to the capacity building of the teaching cadre.

Recent developments are potentially a game changing move. Implementation of the new policy to create 24 central schools has already begun (MoE 2014b). Schools will be consolidated, others built. These central schools are intended to be four fifths open to students who board and some of those who enrol will be as young as five years-old. It is likely that some multigrade schools will go and many young children will be forced to leave their parents to undertake primary school. We wonder about this aspect of the experiment. Training of teachers and others will be required in these new central schools, especially for principals as these schools cover pre-primary to at least Class X as well as having extensive boarding facilities and extra-curricular programmes (MoE 2014b).

Generally speaking, it is clear that the Royal Government and the MoE must continue, even re-double, its efforts to build the quality of teaching. In the early decades the emphasis was upon placing teachers in front of classes. About two decades ago in-service retraining began (Laird et al. 1999) as did multi-grade capacity building. A little later, two-year trained teachers were given the opportunity to up-grade their qualifications via a mixed-mode Bachelor degree from Samtse

College of Education (Maxwell et al. 2006/2008). Pressure is now upon the MoE in more specialist areas. Two areas are those of current initiatives: EGNH and central schools (see above and Kezang Sherab, Maxwell and Cooksey, chapter “[Teacher Understanding of the Educating for Gross National Happiness Initiative](#)”, this volume). However, as the Royal Government responds to demand for equity of access and also outcomes (MoE, 2014a), the need for more specialised areas of capacity building are becoming more obvious. For example, Rinchen Dorji and Schuelka (chapter “[Children with Disabilities in Bhutan: Transitioning from Special Educational Needs to Inclusive Education](#)”, this volume) make a case for greater integration of inclusive practices across all education training programs. A compulsory module on inclusive education is taken in pre-service awards, but interacting with students with disabilities during the teacher placement would give students real-life experiences of inclusion. Going further than this, we strongly support the move to introduce an in-service post-graduate award in inclusive education at Paro. Informal inclusive education courses are also needed to support those teachers who already have children with disabilities in their classes. Such informal courses should not be ‘one-off’ events but rather part of a series of planned activities over time. ECCD (early childhood care and development) is an area that is just taking hold and capacity building is essential if ECCD is to go beyond mere child-minding. Kinley Seden and Maxwell (chapter “[Gender and Education in Bhutan](#)”, this volume) showed that continuing work is needed to address gender inequity across the Bhutanese society and so in schools. As discussed by them, much gender inequitable practices come from taken for granted positions that need to be addressed. These ‘taken for granted’ are part of the hidden curriculum and would necessarily be part of EGNH capacity building. Perhaps this is an area where the Royal University of Bhutan (RUB) can take a lead. Using research to expose the hidden curriculum in Bhutanese schools and other places would assist in EGNH development. Indeed, all the areas identified as challenges are open to research.

Finally, if we assume that the Royal University of Bhutan (RUB) aspires to be a university in the full sense then its academic staff need to take a stronger position on research. However, it is important to note that the amalgamation of the various colleges into RUB introduced this new element (research) into their job description (Maxwell 2012b) and this is a key challenge that Schofield (chapter “[Higher Education in Bhutan: Progress and Challenges](#)”, this volume) has identified. Only now are the numbers of staff with doctorates, in some of the colleges, developing such that there is a critical mass of people qualified and interested in research to take the research effort forward. Sending scholars to other countries for post-graduate research training will no doubt continue, but there are internal mechanisms that can be adopted. These include the implementation of RUB’s own PhD programme, the mentoring of staff by those who are already qualified; institutional pressure for staff to undertake research, including research publication as a criterion for promotion; as well as other ideas (see Phintsho Choeden and Maxwell 2012; Maxwell 2012b; Schofield, chapter “[Higher Education in Bhutan: Progress and Challenges](#)”, this volume).

Future Research

Bhutan is wide open to research, especially for the Bhutanese themselves. So little has been done, including in education. The Bhutanese socio-cultural context means that good quality studies from elsewhere could be used as the basis for studies in Bhutan, although care has to be taken in translating concepts from one cultural context to another. There is also uniquely Bhutanese research that can be done such as in EGNH, where Kezang Sherab, Pema Tshomo, and others are leading the way. Research might be undertaken in one of the challenging areas for education: the role of the community in schooling, especially including ECCD and, relatedly, what form might this relationship take? Historically, parents have had a ‘hands off’ approach. To some extent this is understandable since many parents and community members would not themselves have gone to school. They would likely feel that they did not know enough and/or felt it appropriate to leave major decisions to those who had more education than they. However, it is clear that there are places where this has already begun. Maxwell observed that in the 2000s at Paga Community School in Chhukha *Dzongkhag* [district], community members were regularly in the classrooms assisting with Dzongkha language development. Actually, these community members had been to NFE classes and learned their Dzongkha there. This was before a Dzongkha *lopen* [teacher] was based at the school. This would be one fruitful area of research and could include case studies of school communities that are already engaging these issues.

We believe that the issues we have raised in this conclusion can easily be addressed by researchers. For example, what are the ways that teachers are addressing EGNH in particular subjects in primary schools? What are the ways that teachers are addressing EGNH in particular subjects in secondary schools? What practices do schools use that are successfully implementing EGNH? What are some practical bridges between monastic and regular schools? How does the hidden curriculum hinder the development of EGNH goals? What is the impact upon teachers and teaching strategies of external examinations in primary schools? What difficulties do children face whose language at home is other than Dzongkha or English? In what ways can the curriculum be broadened or the schooling system re-structured in order to make schooling more responsive to economic demands of a modern Bhutanese economy? The list goes on.

Conclusion

The chapters in this volume indicate that there has been a long history of education in Bhutan but also, since the formal introduction of secular schooling, tremendous progress. This is particularly the case for the primary sector where Millennium Development Goals have largely been met. While there is still some way to go in the

A boy shows off by climbing the ruins of an old house (Photo: Clint Chapman)



secondary and tertiary sectors, considerable progress has been made in a remarkably short period of time.

Educators in Bhutan are currently challenged in a number of areas. These include finding ways to match secondary schooling, and particularly the tertiary sector, to the economic needs of the country. There are also equity issues that need continued attention – notably in the areas of gender, ECCD and children with disabilities. Researchers can play an important part in Bhutan’s education systems by focusing upon research questions that can have an impact on the future development of these and other areas.

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