

Challenges for implementing Inclusive Education in Bhutan

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Abstract

Achieving universal primary education for all has been realized in most of the world, yet in developing countries, only 73% of children of primary school age complete the primary school level (UNESCO, Global Education Monitoring Report 2016). These excluded children include refugees, language-minority children, children suffering from HIV/AIDS, and, at the highest percentage, children with disabilities. Providing quality education for all children regardless of gender, ethnicity, or disabilities, is undoubtedly an urgent matter, and Bhutan is not an exception. The major purpose of this paper is to uncover challenges for implementing inclusive education for children with disabilities in Bhutan. The data underlying this survey is mainly composed of questionnaires and interviews conducted in the country. The results indicate that in Bhutan, school-related factors, such as “insufficiency of appropriate facilities and equipment” and “over-capacity of teachers” are ranked high as obstacles to implement quality learning in school for children with disabilities. Similarly, some perceptual gap was found between teachers teaching at special classes or special schools and regular class teachers. Those regularly working with children with disabilities understand their ability more fully and felt stress resulting from the reality in which children with disabilities are NOT fairly treated or valued. This indicates some psychological barrier against children with disabilities as a whole.

Education System in the Country

Bhutan is a landlocked country surrounded by the Himalayan Mountains and China to the north and India to the south. According to the World Bank, it is a lower middle income country with a population of about 798,000 and a GNI per capita of 2,510 USD (2016). The national religion is Tibetan Buddhism. The origin of the country traces back to the 17th century when Ngawang Namgyal, a Tibetan Buddhist lama, unified a number of fiefs and consolidated the basic nation-state of Bhutan. Then Ugyen Wangchuck became the first Druk Gyalpo, the King of Bhutan in 1907. The country was an absolute monarchy until 2008 when the Fourth King of Bhutan, Jigme Singye Wangchuck, carried out a reform that changed the governing system from absolute monarchism to constitutional monarchism. He then abdicated the throne in favor of his son, the Fifth King of Bhutan, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck. The country became well known after 97% of the people answered that they are happy in the census of 2005.

One of the characteristics of Bhutanese basic education is that compulsory education does not exist. This means that, while the government offers free basic education, they do not enforce it as compulsory. For instance, the government has made pre-primary level to 10th grade education free, and thanks to this, as of 2013, even though education is not compulsory, the estimated net enrollment rate for the primary level secondary (PP-VI) is 96% and that of the lower and middle secondary level (class VII-X) is 86% (Ministry of Education, Royal Government of Bhutan 2013). This also contributes to the high youth (15-24 years old) literacy rate of 86%, which is higher than the adult literacy rate of 55% (ibid).

On the other hand, as with other countries, students in Bhutan have to repeat the same grade if they fail the exam, and the number of age-appropriate students in a particular grade is only 26% (MoE, Royal Government of Bhutan 2012). Basically all classes from PP through higher education are conducted in English except for Dzongkha, the national language and history class. All aspects of life in Bhutan are bilingual, and, for instance, TV broadcasts are alternatively in English and Dzongkha. Therefore, Bhutanese school children are quite skilled in English as well as their national language Dzongkha.¹ A summary of Bhutan's education system is listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Bhutanese School System

Age	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22
School Level	Pre-school			Basic Education											Higher Secondary Education	Tertiary Education				
	Early Childhood Care and Development Centres			Primary Education					Secondary Education				Higher Secondary School	Undergraduate Courses						
				Primary School					Lower Secondary School	Middle Secondary School										

(Source: *Annual Education Statistics 2012: 24th Edition*, p.15, MoE, Royal Government Bhutan, Edited by the author)

GNH Education

Another characteristic of education is GNH education. GNH stands for Gross National Happiness, which was initiated by the Fourth King of Bhutan, Jigme Singye Wangchuck in 1971. GNH is the Bhutanese developmental philosophy and is based on Tibetan Buddhism. In 2002, the government of Bhutan delineated four pillars of GNH: (1) sustainable & equitable socio-economic development, (2) environmental preservation, (3) promotion & preservation of culture, and (4) good governance. These four pillars became

¹ More than 1,000 languages exist in Bhutan, but the national language is Dzongkha.

the ideal national policy that the country should pursue. From 1999 to 2010, students from PP to 12th grade received a subject called “valued education” which centered on the four pillars of GNH. From 2010 onward, however, in addition to these four pillars, nine domains of GNH such as ecology, (psychological) well-being, community vitality, health, education, cultural diversity, standard of living, good governance, and time use, and 72 variables that fall underneath these nine pillars were added. Schools were strongly encouraged to teach these GNH values and initiated GNH-infused education, as official documents indicated that “the chances of happiness will be much higher if a person gets various elements under each of these nine domains of life” (MoE, Royal Government of Bhutan 2011, p.2).²

Since achieving “quality of education” is listed as one of the objectives of GNH education, the rest of the paper portrays how quality of education has or has not been guaranteed in terms of inclusive education by highlighting the research that the author and her colleagues conducted in Bhutan in September 2012. The purpose is to locate gaps between local school needs and national policy on inclusive education.

While UNESCO utilizes the terms “inclusive education” or “Special Needs Education” with respect to refugee children, HIV/AIDS affected children, children with disabilities, etc. in a much broader sense, this paper uses the term “inclusive education” to refer to “education for children with disabilities” since official documents published in Bhutan indicate as such (c.f. MoE, Royal Government of Bhutan *Annual Education Statistics* 2013). Other terminology used in the published documents is listed in Table 2. Since Bhutan is still in the process of integrating disabled students into the mainstream, Bhutanese published documents often alternate among terms such as “special needs education,” “integration,” and “inclusion.” It is worth noting that “gifted” is also included among children with special needs education.

² However, there are pros and cons for this approach, and some critics argue that “enforcing GNH values into the current education is foreign and is not Bhutan original culture” (Tshering 2010, *Bhutan Observer*, April 23, 2010, in Sakurai, 2012, *emphasis* added).

Table 2. Terminology on Special Needs Education³

Terminology	Definition
Special Education	Refers to an educational programme designed for students with special educational needs who require additional support services in the form of trained teachers, teaching approaches, equipment and care within or outside a regular classroom.
Integration	A child's attendance at an integrated school. It also refers to the process of transferring a student to a less segregated setting.
Inclusion	A term used to include every child regardless of her/his disabilities, colour, creed, culture, religion, language, and regional or ethnic background for her/his education.
Child with Special Education Needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Has significant difficulty in performing any activity compared with the majority of children of the same age ● Has a barrier which prevents or hinders her/him from making use of educational facilities of a kind generally provided for children of the same age in school ● Is gifted

(Source; MoE, Royal Government of Bhutan 2012, p.19-20).

Development of Inclusive Education in Bhutan

While the net enrollment rates for secondary school or seventh to tenth grades has increased and reached 86% in 2013 (MoE, Royal Government of Bhutan 2013, p.5), education for children with disabilities still faces many challenges in terms of policy formulation, improving school infrastructure, and providing appropriate teacher training programs, etc.

As shown in Table 3, the first specialized institution for visually impaired persons was built in Khaling, Trashigang by His Royal Highness Prince Namgyel Wangchuck in 1973, and it was not for another 30 years until 2001 when the government initiated special education programs and began to build schools and institutions for children with disabilities under an “integration” policy—a process to transfer students to a less segregated setting, i.e., a regular school with additional facilities and infrastructure—” (MoE, Royal Government of Bhutan 2012, p.20). This guideline also advances GNH education policies, including concepts enshrined in the Education for All commitment, such as “green school” and “child friendly school.” Note that EFA was disseminated through the 2000s, so the timing of expanding education for children with disabilities in

³ Bhutan utilizes the term “disability” in the same way as the WHO’s *The International Classification of Impairments, Disabilities and Handicaps (ICIDH)* published in 1980. According to this definition, disability is an “umbrella term for impairments, activity limitations and participation restrictions. Disability is the interaction between individuals who have a health condition (e.g. cerebral palsy, down syndrome or depression) and personal and environmental factors (e.g. negative attitudes, inaccessible transportation, or limited social support) (WHO, URL) <http://www.who.int/classifications/icf/en/>.

Bhutan echoes those of EFA goals. The number of schools and institutes for children with disabilities increased throughout the 2000s, and currently, there are eight special education institutions, in which 249 boys and 149 girls are learning (see Table 4).

Table 3. Development of Policy for Children with Special Education Needs in Bhutan

Year	Events
1973	Special institution for the visually impaired was built in Khaling, Trashigang
2001	Special Needs Education Program was first initiated in Changangkha MSS
2005	National Census—it appears that 3.4% of Bhutanese people have some disability, among whom about 12% are ages 5-17 years old.
September 21, 2010	Signed the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children with Disabilities (although Bhutan has not yet ratified it as of September 1, 2017).
2010-2011	National Statistics Bureau, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health and UNICEF jointly conducted “Two-Stage Child Disability Study.” It reveals that 21% of children ages 2-9 have some disabilities.
2012	The Ministry of Education drafted the “National Policy on Special Education Needs” (2012) and tried (1) to ensure every child with special educational needs has equal access to quality education that is more appropriate, enabling and responsive. (2) to empower the children with special education needs to become independent, responsible and productive citizens (MoE, Royal Government of Bhutan 2012, p.7).
November 2015	Gross National Happiness Committee coordinated with all other stakeholders of disability to draft “National Policy for Person with Disabilities.”

(Source: Author compiled the data from Royal Government of Bhutan (2012) and interview with the officers from the Special Education Section, ECCD & SEN Division, DSE, MoE, Bhutan)

In terms of legal framework, on September 21, 2010, the country signed the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD)⁴, which tries to promote, defend and reinforce the human rights of all persons with disabilities. This timing of the signing on September 21, 2010 almost overlaps with the timing of a nationwide survey, the *Two-Stage Child Disability Study 2010-2011*, the first survey on children with disabilities in the country that was implemented for the purpose of capturing the nature and prevalence of disabilities (see Table 3).

While Bhutan has not yet ratified the UN CRPD, the Disabled Persons Organizations (DPOs) in Bhutan and other stakeholders are pushing for ratification (interviewed ECCD SE section, MoE May 2, 2016). In addition, the draft of the National Policy on Special Education Needs (SEN) was finalized by the Ministry of Education in 2012 to (1) guarantee equal access to quality education for children with Special Education Needs and (2) to empower children with SEN to become independent and productive citizens.

⁴ The UN general assembly adopted it on December 31, 2006. As of today, more than 160 countries and territories have signed and ratified. Japan, for instance, signed it on September 28, 2007 and ratified it on January 20, 2014.

Currently, this policy is incorporated into the National Education Policy, implying that the government has been integrating special education policy into the larger national education framework.

Table 4. Enrolment in Special Education Institute/Schools

Prefecture	Name of the Institute	Unit within the Institute	Enrolment (boys, girls)
Mongar	Mongar LSS	Mongar LSS	43(25,18)
Paro	Drugyel LSS	Deaf Education Unit	78(48,30)
"	Drugyel LSS	Main Stream	94(44,50)
Samtse	Tenduk HSS	"	83(53,30)
Thimphu	Changangkha MSS	"	48(30,18)
Trashigang	Khaling LSS	"	14(9,5)
"	Jigmeshrubling HSS	Jigmeshrubling HSS	16(12,4)
"	Muenselling Institute	Institute serving the blind and low vision of <i>Bhutan</i>	32(16,16)
Zhemgang	Zhemgang LSS	Zhemgang LSS	16(12,4)
Total			424(249,149)

(Source) Special Education Unit, DES, MoE in *Annual Education Statistics 2013*, MoE, Royal Government of Bhutan, p.17.

Similarly, the “National Policy for Persons with Disabilities,” drafted by the Gross National Happiness Committee and by all the other stakeholders involving disability, is expected to be completed soon. Needless to say, all of these are stepping-stones for consolidating a platform of quality education regardless of disabilities.

From the perspective of research on disability, the results of the aforementioned national survey, *Two-Stage Child Disability Study 2010-2011*, shocked the nation since about 30% of the children in the country ages 2-9 revealed that they have at least one disability, with the first survey in which ten questions were administered to mothers or primary caretakers of children of the age 2-9 cohorts. However, this data counted children with glasses as having a “disability” in terms of vision, for instance, and thus may have inflated the percentage. The second stage of this same survey assessed eight domains of disability: 1) vision, 2) hearing, 3) cognition, 4) fine motor, 5) gross motor, 6) speech, 7) behavior, and 8) seizures and 21.3 % of children aged 2 to 9 were found to be disabled. However, at the same time, 18.6% of the children had “mild disability” whereas 2.8% of them had “moderate” or “severe” disability; therefore, disabilities of most children seem to be mild. Further, it is worth noting that “age of the children” along with “maternal education” and “poverty” are listed as factors affecting disability, meaning that some disabilities are likely to eventually disappear when the child grows. Considering the way that the survey was conducted and that wearing glasses is considered “visually disabled,” there seems to be much room left to improve survey methods.

Perception Gap between Policy and Local Schools

In implementing a national survey on disability and preparing the legal framework, the government of Bhutan has been trying to meet the needs of all children regardless of disabilities and is trying to guarantee access and encourage empowerment for all people in Bhutan. However, how do local teachers conceive of such education for children with disabilities? Do they think any obstacles exist that hinder learning in school for children with disabilities? Do the perceptions of teachers differ by school type; i.e. do teachers working at regular schools or teachers working at special institutions or schools with special units (classes) for children with special needs have different opinions regarding obstacles for quality education for children with special needs?

In an attempt to answer these questions, the author and her team conducted a survey in Thimphu and Paro in September 2012. The survey team received support from the Special Education Section, ECCD & SEN Division, DSE, Ministry of Education Bhutan, and questionnaire surveys and interviews were conducted. The remainder of this paper reports the voices from the local schools and institutions. The venues we visited other than the Ministry of Education, Bhutan, are listed in Table 5. Twenty school teachers, including head teachers or principals with special units for children with disabilities or a NGO center, as well as 31 teachers at three regular schools, were interviewed for this survey.

Table 5. List of Institutions/Schools Visited

Possession of a special education needs unit	Prefecture	Name of institution or school	Number of faculty interviewed)
Yes	Paro	Drugyel Lower Secondary School, LSS (pp to 8 th grade)	11
	Thimphu	Changangkha Middle Secondary School, MSS (PP to 10 th grade)	5
	Thimphu	Draktsho, Vocational Training Centre (NGO) (13 to 50)	4
No	Paro	GaupeL LSS (as of 2012)	9
	Thimphu	Changzontok LSS	12
	Thimphu	Jigme Losel Primary School (pp to 5 th grade)	10

The obstacles of learning in school for children with disabilities mentioned by all the interviewees are listed in Table 6. “Insufficiency of teacher training course” or “school equipment” or “over-capacity of teachers,” or all school (related) factors, were the top three reported obstacles. However, some social factors, such as “immaturity of labour market” or “lack of community understanding,” were also marked as problems that hinder quality education for children with disabilities. It is worth noting that in Bhutan, at

least among public school teachers and NGO members, “school factors” are more highly ranked as an “obstacle” or “hindrance” to achieving good quality education for children with disabilities than “family related factors” such as “poor economic family status” or “lack of parental understanding.” It is perhaps because the country just began to put forth much effort on inclusive education, starting around 2010, by raising awareness, providing more teacher training courses, and the breadth and depth of preparing/building facilities so that children with disabilities are more integrated into mainstream education.

Table 6. Obstacles that Hinder Learning in School for Children with Disabilities

Order	Item	Average	Factor type
1	Insufficiency of teacher training course	4.44	School Factor
2	Insufficiency of appropriate facilities and equipment	4.27	School Factor
3	Over-capacity of teachers	4.13	School Factor
4	Immaturity of appropriate curriculum, teaching materials and textbooks	3.87	School Factor
5	Immaturity of labor market	3.87	Social Factor
6	Lack of special education classes or formal classes for children with disabilities	3.67	School Factor
7	Poor economic status of home	3.56	Family Factor
8	Lack of community understanding	3.20	Social Factor
9	Lack of parental understanding	3.15	Family Factor
10	Difficulty of going to school on road	3.11	School Factor

Note. The questionnaire was 5-Likert with 5 as strongly agree, 1 as never agree, and 3 as fair.

Another interesting finding from the survey is that when t-tests were conducted with respect to (1) institutional category or school type (regular school vs. school with special unit or special school, or NGO), (2) gender, (3) age, and (4) position (head teacher/director vs. regular teacher), statistically significant differences were found with respect to the obstacles to learning in school for children with disabilities. Among these differences, the most striking difference was found for school type. For instance, in regard to “immaturity of labor market,” which ranked fifth in Table 6, while the average at regular schools was 3.43, the average at schools with special classes or at special schools was 4.4 ($n=30$; 25 ; $p<0.01$). Similarly, while the regular school teachers consider “lack of community understanding” as a hindering problem with a score of 2.87, teachers working at special schools or units scored it as 3.60 ($n=30$; 25 ; $p<0.05$). Notably, it was apparent that those who work with children with disabilities consider social factors as more serious problems than those working at regular schools. In a similar vein, the scores for “lack of parental understanding” (2.8 vs. 3.56; $n=30$; 25 ; $p<0.05$) as well as “insufficiency of appropriate systems to analyze results of student learning (for children with disabilities)” (3.21 vs. 4.08; $n=30$; 25 ; $p<0.01$), teachers working with children with disabilities marked higher scores than those working at regular schools. This could imply that those regularly working with

children with disabilities understand their ability more fully and felt stress resulting from the reality in which children with disabilities are not fairly valued or judged in family, school and society.

Following the difference in school by school type, the second largest difference was observed when examined by position of teachers (whether head teachers or principals vs. regular teachers). Head teachers or principals considered “lack of community understanding” as a more serious problem than did regular teachers (4.17 vs. 3.06; $n=6, 48$; $p<0.05$). While the reason for the significant difference is unclear, it could be because head teachers are more aware of the job market and thus understand the realities more clearly than regular teachers. It may be noted that these perspectives could affect the success of job hunting among children receiving special education.

The third observable difference in answer to the question of “obstacles of learning in school for children with disabilities” between teachers (including head teachers and regular teachers) vs. ministry officers was that while ministries considered “immaturity of legal aspects” as the most serious problem, teachers considered “insufficiency of teacher training courses and experiences with children with disabilities” as the most serious problem. Although the Bhutanese MoE has been providing many workshops on Special Education Needs for existing teachers, NGOs, ECCD facilitators and so forth, teachers are permitted to attend only one workshop per year. Thus, these differences with respect to school type, position, gender, etc. may sometimes reflect self-centered views.

In Bhutan, the process of transferring a student to a less segregated setting, such as from a special school to a special class in a regular school is referred to as “integration,” and “inclusion” refers to “including all children regardless of disabilities, color, creed, culture, religion, language, regions and ethnic background for education” (MoE, Royal Government of Bhutan 2012, p.19-20). From our interviews, while many interviewees considered promotion of inclusive education as a “(very) good initiative,” an answer from a teacher working at a special education unit struck the author. The interviewee admitted that while inclusive education policy is good, “I am not sure whether full-inclusion where all children with/without disabilities learn at the same classroom is good or not.” These voices shall be conveyed to officials, as there seems to be a gap at least with respect to the ideal picture of “inclusive education,” i.e. *the Annual Education Statistic 2013* (MoE, Royal Government of Bhutan) indicates that “...the long-term objective of Special Education programme is to provide access to general education in regular schools for all children with disabilities and special needs, including those with physical, mental and other types of impairment” (MoE, Royal Government of Bhutan 2013, p.17).

Bhutan is just beginning to push inclusive education and working to better education for children with disabilities, but the country still has a long way to go; therefore, these different voices, appraising the problem from their particular points of view, have meaning and should affect the way the country attempts to improve education for children with disabilities. At the same time, these differing perspectives indicate that the policy level and the school level might not always have the same outlook and thus reveals potentially

challenging aspects of implementing what inclusive education should be in the country.

Way Forward

Under the education category in the GNH education policy, “quality of education” is listed as one of the important aspects. From the perspectives of the schools implementing special education, it was apparent that special education units have much better classroom quality; for instance, special classes have wooden walls and floors and pleasant lights, whereas regular classes often have walls and floors made of concrete with broken light bulbs. Each student in a special unit (special education class) has a better desk, whereas students in regular classes sometimes use large desks shared by at least five or six students. Further, special units have multiple teachers (including assistants) for a smaller number of students, whereas regular classroom students are taught by one teacher. Sign language and other teaching methods were utilized where necessary in the special units. In addition, Individual Education Programs have been implemented at the special unit and students learn reading, writing, math, and behavior under this program agreed upon by parents, classroom teachers, subject teachers, special education coordinators, and principals so that quality of education can be assured. Just as with students in regular classes in Bhutan, if students in a special unit fail the exam, they also repeat the same grade. This is a way of assuring equity in the country. While it seems like students in the special units have good quality of education, it is unclear how many students with disabilities are excluded from school education even if they prefer to attend the school.

Just as with other developing countries, Bhutan has also been trying to encourage the concept of inclusive education that matches the concept of UNESCO’s “inclusiveness.” Recent Annual Education Statistics 2013 also shifted the term from “special education” to “inclusive education.” However, in terms of policy, administration, and most of all the ideal picture of inclusiveness, it has still yet to be defined.

In 2013, for the first time, the Paro College of Education, Bhutan, sent out B.Ed students who received a bachelor degree in special education. This is important since no special education major previously existed at the tertiary level. While there are still many steps to go, such as following up on these graduates from Paro College of Education, it was apparent that not only the government officials but also local teachers and NGOs are really trying to consider what is best for all students. With all hopes for these new graduates, and the endeavors by all stakeholders from teachers, NGOs, and government officials, inclusive education should take root in Bhutan, and the future of education of students with special needs deserves attention.

Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge Mr. Kinley Gyeltshen and Mr. Karma Norbu from the Special Education Section, ECCD & SEN Division, DSE, Ministry of Education, Bhutan for their invaluable assistance in conducting the study and in preparation of this manuscript.

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