

Improving the Quality of Schooling: Some Observations from Bhutan

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V Santhakumar and Phuntsho Choden

1. Introduction

The need for 'quality schooling for all' has been recognized by governments of most countries and many multilateral organizations. However, many countries, especially those in the developing and poorer parts of the world, are far from reaching this crucial goal. There are serious challenges that need to be overcome to achieve this.

There is also a realization that 'quality schooling for all' cannot be achieved merely through the improvements in the provision of schooling such as providing better school infrastructure, having better-qualified teachers, or making the curriculum and pedagogy attractive to the students. There may be an equally, if not more, important need for demand measures, which encourage parents to use schools not only to enrol their children but also to retain them through it and ensure that the children learn at school (Santhakumar et al, 2016).

It is easy to visualize the two-way linkage between education and economic development of a country. It is obvious that education contributes to economic and human development in most contexts, especially, if other enabling policies are in

place. It is also true that underdevelopment works against education by negatively affecting enrolment, retention and learning of children in school. Hence, the efforts to address the issues of underdevelopment and to improve the access to and quality of schooling have to go hand in hand. The specific goals and strategies of economic development of a nation, impact the spread of education among its population and the quality of schooling for all. Different countries in the developing world are at different levels of progress in this regard. How do various countries attempt to improve the access to and quality of school education by overcoming the constraints in terms of underdevelopment is an interesting issue for both the theory and the practice of educational change. It is in this context that this study looks into the recent developments in school education in Bhutan.



The government of Bhutan spends a substantial part of its

resources on education compared to many other developing countries¹. There are several documents and studies which assess the quality of school education in the country. These include the [National Curriculum Framework](#) (2009) and the [Review Report on the Quality of Education](#) which took into consideration processes like curriculum development and teacher education (VanBalkom & Sherman, 2009). A study has also been conducted on the linkage between the Gross National Happiness and classroom processes (Utha et al, 2016). A few studies also indicate the impact of socio-economic factors and gender norms on the enrolment and retention of children in schools (Subedi and Nepal, 2010; Choden and Sarkar, 2012).

An assessment of the status and nature of challenges in quality schooling in Bhutan may be important not only for the country but also for others, including India. (A similar assessment on [Himachal Pradesh](#) was done by us earlier). Indian states, such as Uttarakhand, where the mountainous topography is a constraint, require appropriate strategies to provide schools which are accessible to all and Bhutan's approach in this regard provides helpful insights. The problem of gender norms prevalent in parts of the north, west and central India which work against the schooling of girls can also be viewed in the light of how in Bhutan, where there are indications that girls are less likely to be enrolled in schools, once enrolled, are not allocated any fewer resources (Choden and Sarkar, 2012). This makes it interesting to look at the situation in Bhutan with regard to the quality of education too.

The remoteness, mountainous topography, and other extreme aspects of Bhutan's geography facilitate employment growth in certain sectors like tourism but not in sectors such as manufacturing. How do these factors of the economy affect the 'demand' for education? Given the focus on enhancing Gross National Happiness by the government of Bhutan, it may be interesting to think about the strategies needed to achieve an

appropriate 'quality schooling for all' to achieve this goal of national development².

It is in this context that this short period fieldwork was carried out in Bhutan to understand the status and challenges regarding 'quality schooling for all'. The research team visited four government schools in four districts – Phuntsholing, Thimphu, Punakha and Gasa. In each district, we interacted with a set of students, in particular, the IX graders. A total of ten students comprising five high-performers and five poor performers were selected from each school by the teachers but the selection criteria was not revealed to the students and their participation in the interaction with us was voluntary. The interactions with these students were informal and they were, without much persuasion, candid in admitting the issues that they confront in learning. We also interacted with a set of parents, mostly, those of the selected students. In addition, there were informal discussions with teachers and Head Teachers without disturbing the functioning of classes. We also sat through a couple of classroom sessions in both the primary and the secondary grades in each of the schools. There were also interactions with non-governmental organizations which work in the area of school education, and also the officials of the Ministry of Education. All these inform our observations on the status of and challenges to schooling in Bhutan, which have been discussed below.

2. Bhutan's education: the beginnings

Modern education does not have a long history in Bhutan. It started only after the 1950s, although there were a few private schools in the early part of the twentieth century in some towns. The traditional education was in religious institutions, such as monastic schools and nunneries. The development of formal schooling has been facilitated by outsiders and staffed by many teachers from India. There was a

time when the Bhutanese students studied everything Indian including history, geography, and economics. The developments in higher education are quite recent, and one may not see many highly qualified educationists in the country. Almost everyone above the age of 25-30 years has been taught by one or the other teacher from Kerala. However, Bhutan has certain enabling factors and these need to be taken into account while considering its status of schooling.

2.1. Enabling factors

With less than one million population, Bhutan is a relatively a small country compared to the Indian states. Based on the annual statistics of education in the country, the number of children in school is currently around 1.7 lakh and they are taught by around 9,500 teachers. Hence, the number of schools and teachers required are small compared to almost any Indian state. The social fragmentation is also less with the majority of the Bhutanese being by and large, part of a homogenous social group. Unlike India, caste divisions or like the hill states of India, the class differentiation between landlords and landless farm workers, is also not very marked. Though there are differences in the dialects spoken in different parts of the country and also by the religious minority mainly the Nepalese Hindus, such differences have not affected schooling. Unlike in India, there are no major restrictions that work against the education of girls which is an advantage. Although there was an initial reluctance to send girls to boarding schools that have started in parts of the country, which was not in the case of boys.

2.2 Debilitating factors

Bhutan has certain debilitating factors too. Mountainous geography and scattered population settlements pose serious challenges. Students have to walk three to four hours to reach day-schools that cater to a sizable population, so they are forced to stay in make-shift homes near the schools to avoid commuting every day. For this reason, most schools require

boarding facilities. It was also not easy to get teachers to work in all these remote settlements. The developments in higher education, including teacher education, are relatively recent in Bhutan. The opportunities and quality of higher education can influence the quality of teachers.

3. The Current picture

Despite all these constraints, Bhutan could improve the school education significantly. Today, there are only a few teachers from India working there. There has been a near nationalization of school education with a changed curriculum and pedagogy. There is a greater focus on Bhutanese history, geography and culture and the curriculum has also changed to reflect national development goals, such as the enhancement of Gross National Happiness. The current status in terms of access to and quality of schooling are discussed below.

3.1 Improvement in infrastructure

There have been substantial investments in the physical infrastructure of schools, including the boarding schools. All schools seem to have satisfactory buildings and wherever there is a need for more, renovations or additions are underway. It is reported that 100% of schools have toilets with two-thirds having flush toilets and 83% of these are fully functional (UNCEF, 2017). Classrooms have a cheerful feel with pictures and charts. Students have comfortable and sufficient number of tables and chairs.



The boarding facilities are comfortable with reasonable provisions and cleanliness. The food served to the boarders and day-scholars in certain schools include local vegetables and meat and seems to provide adequate nutrition to children. There are libraries in all schools, and some of these are located in spacious and comfortable buildings. Since the country only needs 600 or so schools, there is an adequate allocation of public resources for building the infrastructure. Though makeshift homes for the boarding purposes still exist, there are indications that this is due to the reluctance of parents to send their wards to distant schools, despite the efforts of the government to do so. In certain locations, NGOs or international organizations have supplemented the school infrastructure. The UNICEF has constructed toilets adjacent to a set of schools where students live in makeshift homes. The overall perception of the non-governmental actors is also that the infrastructure

facilities have improved over time and the need for their supplemental action in this regard has declined.

3.2 Better access to schooling

Bhutan's achievements in terms of access to education are remarkable. There is nearly 99% enrolment in the primary grades³, and hardly any difference between boys and girls in this regard. However, there may be some children with special needs who are yet to be enrolled in schools in remote areas. This poses a challenge for inclusive education of all children. The gross enrolment ratio in the secondary grades is above 95% indicating a very high retention rate in the primary grades. Only about two to three percent of the relevant age group are not in the junior secondary schools, with no difference between boys and girls in this regard too. We could see children from distant districts studying in boarding schools located far away from their homes. Though there could be a certain drop at the time of joining higher secondary grades (grade 11), most children from vulnerable backgrounds are in secondary schools. One issue that causes this vulnerability is the separation of parents and/or single parenthood (as evident from discussions with the students). Though this creates some emotional distress in children and may affect their learning, they are attending junior secondary schools. The two to three percent who are out of school may include those who have dropped out to work or to marry (both boys or girls).

3.3 The motivation and performance of teachers

Though Bhutan has depended on teachers from India until a decade ago, currently, most of the teachers are locals. The improvements in school education during the last ten years are driven primarily by the Bhutanese teachers. We could see highly proficient teachers among them, some of them young with graduate education from Bhutan and post-graduate degrees from abroad. Out of the five classrooms that we observed, three were remarkable for the enthusiasm and passion of the teachers

and the response of the students. There were also teachers who were not very active but not indifferent. Compared to teachers in government schools in India and elsewhere, the average quality of teachers in the government schools in Bhutan is far better. There are only a few teacher-training colleges in Bhutan and since they don't seem to follow a strategy of quantitative expansion of teacher-training institutes without ensuring adequate quality of such institutes (as in India), the average quality of pre-service training of teachers seems to be relatively better. It is possible that in Bhutan relatively good students opt for school teachers' jobs, which is also not the case in India, currently.



There is no issue of teacher absenteeism and this is noted not only in schools but also in the discussions with the policy-

makers. It may be interesting to note that the average salary of a teacher (and probably other government employees) is lower – and the cost of living higher – in Bhutan in comparison with the corresponding figures in India. However, that does not seem to have dampened the enthusiasm of teachers in Bhutan. We met highly motivated Head Teachers and some of them not only manage their schools well but also carry out action research on school practices.

3.4 Focus on improving the quality of schooling

The first step in the education reform in a developing country is to ensure that there is a hundred percent enrolment of children and most of them remain in school until the completion of a level of education. Bhutan seems to have gone well ahead in this regard. This has been achieved by a number of other countries too. However, the next step is to enhance the quality of learning which is a difficult task experienced even by those countries which have ensured hundred percent enrolment and retention. This is also evident from the learning achievements measured using different methods and as part of different international and national attempts.

During our fieldwork in different schools in different social contexts, we have asked teachers the approximate percentage of children in a classroom who are not learning well, not on the basis of any objective measure or test results but by their own subjective assessment. This figure can be as high as 60-70% in schools in parts of India and 40-50 % is quite common not only in India but also in Brazil and Indonesia. However, in Bhutan, it is only around 15-20%. This was also confirmed by our interaction with students who are at different levels of proficiency (based on the teachers' perspective). Some from the group of low achievers are interested in extra-curricular activities. (The aspiration to be a footballer is common among the students.) Others have some or the other genuine reason and we found them to be sincere despite being unable to do well in studies. Most of

them wish to do well (one reason is that they need to get a good grade for admission in government secondary schools, otherwise they have to spend on the more expensive private schools). If they fail to score good grades, may also decide to go back and help parents in their occupations.

Each school and teacher make extra efforts to improve the learning levels of these children. This includes additional tutoring, bridge courses and special attention by teachers. There were conscious efforts to improve the quality of schooling. Though some of these have started during the last decade, there was an added emphasis during the last five years. These included professional development programs for teachers, the development of a curriculum to make it more relevant to national and global contexts, development of standards for inclusive education, and giving more autonomy to schools, among others. The shift to child-centred learning in Bhutan was relatively quick and effective during the last ten years⁴, though such a transition is tedious and incomplete in India despite being part of policy documents.

3.5 Mixed-ability grouping of students

Another strategy used to improve the learning levels of all children is the mixed-ability grouping in classes. Classrooms are arranged differently, there are several tables and four to five students sit around each. This arrangement is based on the teacher's evaluation of the students and each table has a mixed set of students – those learning well and those who lag behind. Each group has both boys and girls, and it is remarkable to see girls very active in these groups. Teachers acknowledge that on an average, girls perform well compared to boys. Discussions and peer-learning that takes place in these groups help the less proficient students to learn better.



This strategy of using mixed-ability groups is interesting for another reason. The alternative strategy advocated by a section of education activists and used in certain contexts⁵ is to have a differential grouping and differential curriculum. Here, students who are not doing well in terms of learning are separated into another group, and different strategies are used (including a diluted curriculum, a different set of tests or use of learning packages to teach reading and numerical abilities quickly) to bridge their achievement gap. Many educationists have criticized this strategy which separates poor performing children because of the negative impact of labelling and differential treatment of children. The experience of Bhutan is important in this context. It indicates that it may be possible to improve the learning achievements in government schools – at scale and on a sustainable basis – without resorting to such segregation of

children.

4. Quality of schooling

It appears that all these strategies have led to a notable improvement in the quality of schooling in Bhutan which now has a relatively small number of children who are not learning well. There is also anecdotal evidence in this regard. A couple of teachers from Kerala who work in Bhutan note that their own children are receiving better schooling in Bhutan than they would have in Kerala.

While discussing the 'quality schooling for all', there is a need to consider a few relevant issues. First, with regard to measuring the quality of education. Some education reformers in various countries advocate the use of standardized tests⁶ to measure the learning achievements of students. However, there are educationists who are against using such test scores as the sole or main measure of quality⁷. They argue that many attributes of the quality of education cannot be captured through these tests. However, the difficulty in using comprehensive measures may make the standardized tests an attractive option. The observation from this field study indicated that the majority of Bhutanese students in schools do well not only in terms of learning but also in extra-curricular activities, and other aspects like concern for environmental protection, inter-personal skills and behaviour.

The discussion with the policy-makers on the issue brings two issues into focus. First, a certain decline in the quality is natural when the school system moves towards near-hundred percent enrolment and retention from a situation where only those children whose parents demand schooling attended schools. Second is the scope for further improvement in the quality of schooling, which is discussed in detail in the last section that notes the persisting challenges to schooling in Bhutan. The education policy-makers in Bhutan have been in

touch with some good quality private schools in India during this phase of their reforms. The government and teachers of Bhutan also adopted some of the best practices from India and elsewhere into their government school system.

5. Schooling in English medium but connect with culture

One notable feature of the schooling in Bhutan is that the medium of instruction is English. There could be historical reasons for it. The fact that the early teachers came from abroad and did not have proficiency in the local language could be an important reason. However, the adoption of English as the medium of instruction has not led to a neglect of their national language. It is taught as an important subject in schools and we could see teachers who specialize in it and students who do well in the subject. This is an important point since there are politicians and intellectuals (especially in various states of India) who argue that an English medium education makes the children neglect their culture, and the medium of instruction should be the local language. There are no indications that the Bhutanese people have abandoned their own language or culture due to the English medium education. Instead, anecdotal evidence indicates that they are much more wedded to their culture than most Indians are to theirs.

6. Out of school activities

It is not that the access to and quality of schooling have improved in Bhutan only because of the governmental efforts to make the schools attractive. Given that the familial and socio-economic conditions too affect the schooling of children, the government of Bhutan and NGOs have intervened to encourage parents to send their children to school.



Though schools provide almost all kinds of support, some poor families living in remote parts who are not able to meet all incidental costs, which works against the schooling of their children, are supported by a couple of NGOs like the [Tarayana Foundation](#) and the [Youth Development Fund](#) that provide scholarships to needy children. Due to the realization of the need and positive impact of such scholarships, the government of Bhutan has adopted and expanded this program. There are also other programs like the trainings, competitions, and recognition for best-performing children carried out by these organizations, and these too encourage children from poor families to do well in school.

7. Focus on government schools

It is remarkable to note that there is a much greater focus on government schools in Bhutan not only by the government but

also among the parents. There are various reasons for strengthening government schools in the education system, and some of these are discussed here. The majority in Bhutan wants their children to be educated in government schools. Unlike Indian states, there is no notable exodus of children from middle-class families to private schools. Though there are a few good-quality private schools in the capital and a few district headquarters, the rest are considered as an inferior option by the parents who believe that the facilities and quality of teachers are relatively better in government schools. The fact that the government schools provide education in English medium could be the added advantage in Bhutan, considering that this is a major reason of migration of children to private schools in India. There are not enough seats in government higher secondary schools to include all those who want admission, and those who are not doing well in junior schools may opt for one or other kind of private schools. The fact that private schools are costly and that government schools have adequate facilities and teachers encourages a number of children from the relatively less affluent backgrounds to join these schools for higher education.

8. Challenges

The schooling in Bhutan faces certain notable challenges and some of these are discussed below.

8.1 Weak early childhood education

The country is yet to have a universal system of early childhood education (ECE). The enrolment in all types of ECE centres is only 22% in 2017 (UNICEF, 2017). India may be in a relatively better position in this regard. The food poverty that exists in India may have encouraged it to have the ICDS (Integrated Child Development Services), which also provide a governmental platform for ECE (called Anganwadi). However, the lower rate of poverty in Bhutan (which was only around 5.8% in

2017)⁸ may have created a different situation there.

In a country with 512 schools, there are only 282 ECE centres, not enough to cover the whole population. The ECE in the government sector is inadequate and can be a serious limitation considering the growing realization of the importance of ECE on the cognitive development of children. It may not be easy to establish ECE centres in Bhutan given that its population settlement are spread-out and infants and very young children cannot be taken to a common centre in many remote locations. This may require the capacity-building of younger parents to follow certain practices of early childhood development and education within their homes. Some efforts are going on with the support of UNICEF to address the issues of children with disabilities. However, there have to be greater efforts in this regard.

8.2 Continued dependence on makeshift homes in some places

Though most students from remote localities have moved to boarding schools if they do not have a school in their vicinity, make-shift homes still exist near some day-schools. We have visited one such school located in between Punakha and Gasa. Though governmental and non-governmental organizations (including UNICEF) have taken efforts to improve the facilities, students living there have to bear the burden of household chores and are vulnerable in different ways. The ministry of education is aware of the issue and they have made plans to send these children to nearby boarding schools. However, parents are not willing to put them in distant schools. It may require greater dialogue to persuade the parents.

8.3 Education and economic development

Conventional industrial development is not viable in Bhutan and considering the 'carrying capacity' of nature there and the concerns about sustainable development, unfettered industrial development may not be desirable. However, the

limited prospects for industrial development can have a negative impact on the employment opportunities in the economy as a whole. This is especially so for those people who complete schooling and want to move out of agriculture although tourism is an important activity in the Bhutanese economy and it creates a significant share of jobs. However, these jobs may not be attractive to people with higher levels of education. The limited job opportunities for educated people may have a dampening effect on the readiness to do well in schooling.

There may be a need to diversify the economy or to encourage other employment opportunities to enhance the attractiveness of education. It may be necessary to explore the feasibility of different opportunities in this regard. It could be the pursuit of high-value (but low-volume) agriculture focusing on niche products and through this process farming itself can become a skilful occupation with relatively better incomes. High-value agriculture or horticulture and the value addition of agricultural products could be for generating products not only for the tourists visiting the country but also for exporting to other countries. Some other potential opportunities can be in the area of non-polluting manufacturing industries, where skills become more important than the scale of production. Other areas can be an expansion of tourism into activities which require the active involvement of people with higher levels of education, for example, tourists can be introduced more deeply to the cultural and developmental attributes of the country. Migration too may play an important role, for example, educated Bhutanese may migrate to India for work, which would be a reversal of the situation in the past. This may not add much to the number of employment seekers in the Indian economy and such an opportunity could be part of the bilateral relationship between the two countries.

8.4 Education for enhancing happiness?

Bhutan has adopted the enhancement of Gross National Happiness (GNH) as the nation's purpose of development. Hence, education in schools has to be oriented to the goal of enhancing happiness. It is true that the school education in Bhutan focusses not only on learning achievements in terms of test scores but also on other dimensions, mentioned earlier – extra-curricular activities, environmental protection, and interpersonal relationships. The pedagogic practices followed too do not suppress critical thinking. Despite these, the link of school education in Bhutan with the goal of enhancing happiness is not very clear.

Those who complete schooling in the country have aspirations like other students elsewhere. They may like to get employment in government or formal industrial/service sectors and earn a decent salary. The not-so-high salaries available in the country are not attractive to many employees, including school teachers⁹. Hence, there is a growing tendency to seek migration as a way to seek better fortunes. Some of them may end up doing low-skilled jobs in Australia or the middle-eastern countries.

It may be noted that the Bhutanese economy is not a closed one. Though certain economic activities are not quite feasible or viable within Bhutan, the sustenance of its economy depends on conventional industrial development in India and other countries. The demand for hydropower in the former and that for high-value tourism among the people of the latter are the ones that sustain and fuel income growth in the Bhutanese economy and society. The recent trends show that out-migration may be another source of income or employment for the people of Bhutan. In such a context, the relationship between 'happiness' and education needs to be analysed critically. It is possible that the enhancement of happiness may not be an objective that can be operationalized within a country. It is also possible that the students or younger generation cannot be fully oriented to the needs of a particular development

goal through education. Hence, more needs to be done both within the spheres of education and economic development to achieve a proper connection between education and a happiness-enhancing development goal.

9. Conclusion: Education and human development

The educational success of Bhutan in our view is in the implementation of a few well-known ideas in education. The plan for education reform was not very complex or esoteric. The way people and different stakeholders have worked together to bring about improvements in the public education system as a whole is a remarkable feature of Bhutan's success in this regard. The relatively higher achievements of Bhutan in terms of human development indicators are not only determined by but have also contributed to the improvements in education.

There was a time that India contributed to the education of Bhutan. It may be now time for some Indian states to learn from Bhutan's efforts to improve the quality of schooling. This is especially so for the strategies to improve the learning achievements of those children who are not from very enabling family backgrounds. There is a recent case where, as part of the education reforms, the government in the state of Delhi has used the ability-based grouping of children and a differential curriculum to bring up the achievements of those children who have lagged behind in terms of academic proficiency. (A detailed discussion of this case is given [here](#)). This strategy is found to be problematic by a number of educationists. The experience of Bhutan indicates that it is indeed possible to improve the learning achievements without segregating children with low proficiency. There are similar lessons from Bhutan's educational experience that can be valuable for India.

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AUTHORS

[V. Santhakumar](#), Professor, Azim Premji University.

Dr Phuntsho Choden is a researcher/consultant in the area of Development Economics, Business and Social Capital. Her experience comprises both real-world applications as well as academia. She has worked with the Department of Revenue and Customs under the Ministry of Finance as Revenue Analyst for more than a decade, which gave her exposure to a range of public policies. She has experience in teaching and research at the Queensland University of Technology, Australia, the Royal Institute of Management and the Gaeddu College of Business Studies under the Royal University of Bhutan. She is also a trainer and has trained both corporate employees and civil servants at the Institute of Management Studies. She has

worked for private sector development, particularly in the area of 'Doing Business'. Dr Choden is an enthusiastic researcher with a great interest in applications of social economics. She holds a double Masters in Economics and a PhD in Social Capital. Currently, she works as a consultant in the Asian Development Bank, Bhutan Resident Mission office.