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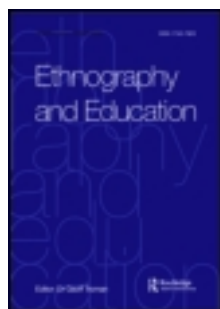
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### Bhutan: educational challenges in the land of the Thunder Dragon

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## **Bhutan: educational challenges in the land of the Thunder Dragon**

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The Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan, where images of magical splendor obscure its challenges, provides a viewpoint from which to understand the contradictions that emerging economies face as they move towards mass education. Isolated from the outside world in every sense except for the mythologies that surround it, Bhutan is attempting to move from a basic agrarian societal framework as found in the feudal 1800s into the whirl of a technologically savvy twenty-first century. The demands for such a transition require educators and politicians at all levels to rethink the role of schooling and what it means to be educated in this country at this point in time. To provide guidance, the government set up a special task force, the Royal Education Council, to devise a curriculum and pedagogy that would equip young people with the skills to move into the future without forsaking their past. This ethnographic piece of research explores the challenges faced by teachers and principals in nine designated Beacon schools as they grapple within a historical context which views teachers as labourers, working under difficult conditions with minimal support. The work ends with the question of whether mass education might in fact move this country away from the traditional values that are perceived as making Bhutan special, if not unique.

**Keywords:** Bhutan; schooling; reforms; education

### **Introduction**

Nested between China and India, geographically, politically and economically, Bhutan is attempting to chart its own course, not only of cultural identity but also of educational opportunity with the goal of retaining traditional values while providing quality schooling for all its children. While education is not new to Bhutan (it has long taken place in the monasteries that dot the mountain sides), modern secular schooling is a relatively recent phenomenon starting in the 1950s (Wangmo and Choden 2011). Located high in the Himalayas, schools remain difficult to access physically and psychologically as parents question the value of an education unrelated to their rural existence, or worse, one that might remove their children from home and community. Given this concern, the Royal Kingdom of Bhutan moved in 2007 to provide guidance for national schooling by establishing a special task force, the Royal Education Council (REC), to devise a curriculum and pedagogy that would equip young people with the skills to move into the future without forsaking the past. The curriculum, offered in designated Beacon Schools, struggled with implementation as school staffs faced a host of challenges due to lack of infrastructure, apathy towards the teaching profession and questions regarding the usefulness of formal education. At the request of the REC, I was invited in 2010 to

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assist in the assessment of the adoption of the curricular reforms. The findings presented here are the result of 60 interviews with teachers, administrators and educational leaders at nine of the designated schools as well as another 40 informal conversations with other stakeholders concerned with changes in education and society. This paper provides a look at a nation confused as to how education will contribute to the goal of retaining a distinctive cultural identity while providing the skills to not only survive in the modern age but also hold on to its young people by providing them with work that contributes to the building of a civil society. Questions arise from this study that are applicable to other developing countries, as educational systems are conceived which will not remove its young people from their families, villages and ultimately the nation itself. Related issues as experienced in neighbouring Nepal are discussed in a valuable issue of *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, edited and introduced by Professors Carney and Rappleye (2011).

### Historical context

In the late twentieth century the Royal Kingdom of Bhutan initiated several reforms aimed at creating a distinctive identity among both its Asian neighbours and the global community. These reforms established a foundation from which Bhutan could begin to move away from dependency on its neighbour, India, and shape its own destiny. The effort is best known from the announcement by its fourth monarch, Jigme Singye Wangchuck, in 1972 that his country's success should and would be measured by GNH (Gross National Happiness) rather than the economic measures of Gross National Product. As stated by the current king, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck (2009):

Thus, for my nation, today GNH is the bridge between the fundamental values of Kindness, Equality and Humanity and the necessary pursuit of economic growth. It ensures that no matter what our nation may seek to achieve, the human dimension, the individual's place in the nation, is never forgotten. It is a constant reminder that we must strive for a caring leadership so that as the world and country changes, as our nation's goals change, our foremost priority will always remain the happiness and wellbeing of our people – including the generations to come after us.

As the movement took shape in actual policies and programmes, its focus became the provision of free health care and education for all Bhutanese (Gandhi 2009). The financial support for this endeavour is provided by the controversial sale of hydroelectric power to India and Bangladesh as most Bhutanese continue to eke out an existence from subsistence agriculture and herding. A cautious approach to tourism is the nation's second most remunerative economic endeavour.

Acknowledging the potential disconnect between a country attempting to retain its distinctive culture while moving its youth forward into the next century, the government in 2007 established a separate and autonomous REC, tasked with the responsibility of developing and implementing an innovative curricular reform based on experiences and examples grounded in the local context while simultaneously providing the skills and predispositions for teachers and students to face a dynamic and uncertain future. The REC has since been incorporated within the Ministry of Education (MOE) but has been allowed to maintain its autonomy as new leadership is found and pilot programmes scrutinised. The official mission for the REC states:

The Royal Education Council (The Council) was established through a Royal Command in August 2007 to initiate and implement education reforms across the entire spectrum covering school, technical and tertiary education. The basis for education reform is founded on the following: His Majesty the King's vision for the country; Policies of the elected government to realize the Royal vision; The acknowledgement among the general population that the present system leaves much to be desired in terms of providing high quality education and the need to resuscitate the education system; The confidence that successful reform is achievable in Bhutan considering the small size and the political will at all levels to support education reforms. (<http://www.rec.org.bt/>)

In 2008, that same monarch, Bhutan's fourth king, Jigme Singye Wangchuck, led in the creation of a constitutional monarchy while Bhutan began the process of developing a modern nation state with a parliament, prime minister and necessary ministries, each with its own bureaucracy. However, the 'Royal Vision' remains a potent influence on people and events under the new monarch, Bhutan's fifth king, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, with education being viewed by the royal family as the essential tool in maintaining a degree of harmony and balance between its monastic traditions and increasing secular schooling (Denman and Namgyel 2008). The fieldwork for this research, conducted in 2011, explores the complexity of maintaining this balance; not an easy job given that modern schooling has the potential of preparing young people with opportunities and options not found, and often not needed, within the mountain-side villages of Bhutan.

### **Methodology**

My interest in Bhutan did not come through the normal channels of infatuation or reverence for the sublime (Crossette 1996). As a researcher of Asian cultures and schooling with a special focus on migration and immigration (Gordon 2009b), I was asked by the Director of the REC if, in my professional capacity as professor of international comparative education, I would come and provide the REC with a lens through which to better understand the challenges facing educational reform in Bhutan. The REC had recently implemented a new 'progressive' curriculum in nine Beacon Schools in the Paro area and were interested in knowing how teachers were responding to the change. While deliberating the possibility of accepting the offer, I spent a year researching the background of the country as well as studying the politics of the MOE and its relationship to the REC. In addition, I continued to consult with the Director of the REC for clarification of important nuances and protocol that would be necessary if I was granted permission to enter the country.

Most of my research in Asia over the last 20 years deals with the impact of economics on educational success, impediments to access for marginalised youth and society's attitudes towards the teaching profession in various countries (Gordon 2005, 2006). While this work has been largely located in Japan, I have also conducted research in several countries that either border Bhutan or share similar rural challenges: Tibet, Xinjiang in northwest China, Myanmar, Indonesia and northern India. The guidance of Sheena Shah (2004) on cross-cultural research in general and the lessons of working with isolated and marginal sites facing educational challenges in the work of Kirby (2011) and Basson (2010) also have a strong resonance with this work.

Once in Bhutan, a rare exception was granted that allowed me to travel without a government guide, providing both freedom of movement and discussion, although on official visits to schools I was accompanied by one of the leading educators in Bhutan, Mr Tagu (a pseudonym). Mr Tagu is a brilliant man who is proud to be Bhutanese and filled with innovative ideas of how to move his country into the next century without sacrificing its culture and young people along the way. My young driver, also a member of the REC, was indispensable in navigating precarious mountain slopes and a thousand miles of rock strewn roads, insuring my timely arrival at numerous meetings. While formal school interviews took place during the day, evenings were filled with meetings with non-classroom educators, literary or political people who had a very strong interest in the research. Invitations to homes, restaurants and cafes where people of consequence shared their dreams and frustrations provided a historical context for what I was hearing and seeing. Professor Troman's guidance on considering the macro context when attempting even the most micro ethnographic study (Troman 2006) is clearly relevant in the way in which I attempted to comprehend the complexity of education, writ large, in Bhutan.

My first week was spent interviewing approximately 15 of the well-educated and influential members of the REC to see not only how they felt about the new curriculum, but also how attitudes towards teaching as a profession shaped who entered the field. With this background in hand, I then headed out to Paro, the old regional capital and the air travel gateway of Bhutan. Prior to my arrival, the Director of REC had set up appointments with the dominant stakeholders in Bhutan and Mr Tagu had contacted all of the schools I was to visit. On the day of my arrival, I was presented with an interview schedule for the coming weeks, complete with names, positions and times, in a detailed format of a quality I had never seen before. It was due to this intense preparation on the part of interested parties in the REC that my time in Bhutan could be so effective, enabling me to complete approximately 100 interviews in the time allotted.

Sixty of these interviews were conducted with teachers, principals and educational leaders who provided me with a first-hand account of their struggles and hopes for schooling in this precariously poised nation. The nine schools which I visited ranged from one located on a remote mountain side offering barely more than shelter, to an up-scale private high school for students who were unable to pass their final exams, hence studying in a private, rather than a public, school. While all were within the same district, the distance between them was significant. It was not unusual for people to talk about distances in terms of the number of days walking rather than the miles. Physical access to some of these schools proved more challenging than professional access as we navigated the narrow roads obstructed by boulders, fallen trees and miscellaneous construction, much of it done by hand, stone by stone.

The interviews were multifaceted. In addition to the individual face-to-face interviews conducted in the Beacon schools with all of the principals and most of the staff, there were also small group discussions without either Mr Tagu or a principal present. The pattern of who spoke with whom in which formation flowed with the situation in which we found ourselves as we came into a school. However, what became evident is that when Mr Tagu and I were together, teachers tended to direct their responses to me. I am not sure if this was because of my position as an outsider,

introduced as a researcher, or the fact that my questions were honed from years as an ethnographer, or if speaking directly to Mr Tagu would have been seen as a possible challenge to authority. Another angle to the interviews had to do with the content of the questions. While Mr Tagu was interested in the challenges that teachers, administrators and students faced as they adapted to a new curriculum, the teachers and principals wanted to share with us the problems they were having with a host of other issues unrelated to the curriculum. These came tumbling out of our encounters like the clear Himalayan waters that cut through the valleys. As a result, while extensive notes were taken on the responses to the reform initiative, what impressed me most were the daily negotiations, the back stories, filling in the spaces in between, the parts that could not be measured, for which there was no rubric. The enthusiasm with which they shared such cutting candidness is rare anywhere in the world. I had not expected it in Bhutan.

At the end of each of these long days, Mr Tagu and I would debrief in our open-backed four-wheel drive truck on our long journey back to the lodge where I was staying. There we would compare notes and fleshed out both his interest in how REC could assist the school, and mine in how the teachers and administrators reflected on their situation. After this, I would return to my room and enter interviews into my computer, leaving at the end a host of questions for which I still needed a larger context to understand fully. These were either sent to the Director of REC or to one of my other contacts in Bhutan who graciously provided clarification.

Following the work in Paro, my driver colleague and I began our research travels into the more remote regions of the country. Numerous construction blockages meant 'everyone out of the truck' and time for a cup of tea at one of the many makeshift stands that just happened to be set up where the long wooden signal, often monitored by a lone young girl with a handmade sign, prevented our journey from continuing. This was particularly true as we moved further into the mountains leading to Punakha, Trongsa and Bumthang. Travelling over a thousand miles in Bhutan and residing in a variety of local communities enabled me to join in community events and expand discussions to road-side chats, guest houses, small hotels and cafes. I also was able to see the vastness of this country and gain a perspective on life in the remote villages. This level of engagement was particularly valuable given the complex nature of Bhutanese society and the many changes that have occurred over the last 30 years. By speaking with people from different age groups and walks of life, I was able to gain a sense of the rumblings beneath the façade of this land of happiness and better understand the range of demands being placed on the various actors who play a role in how education is to be carried out in the future. As a result, more than 40 conversations took place with merchants, labourers, business people, government officials, parents, students, extended royal family members, former military, monks and lamas. Wherever I was, I took notes; no one seemed to mind. I think this was largely because it was known that I was a professor and new to Bhutan, so it was logical that I would need clarification on what I was seeing and hearing, after all, most Bhutanese think that they and their country's challenges are unique, which they are not (Gordon 2009a). In addition to three notebooks of written notes from observations, conversations and formal interviews, over 1300 photos attempt to capture the complex nature of this unusual country and its proud people.

**The findings*****Teacher morale***

What became evident over the course of the research was that while teachers appreciated and learned from the progressive curricular reforms offered by the REC, their foremost concerns lay with the formidable obstacles they faced in terms of work conditions and their society's negative attitudes towards labour, including the teaching profession. While the REC was not blind to these issues, as an educational organisation their mandate lay with what took place within the classroom; it had little control over the political issues that called for improved infrastructure, enhanced resources and greater attention to the placement of teachers. All of the teachers and administrators with whom I spoke praised the REC curricular reforms and saw improvement in student learning as a result of this more innovative programme. However, they also knew that without greater attention to their situation from the MOE and society at large, their frustrations could lead to an even greater rejection of the teaching profession and, hence, the disabling of a society just beginning its journey to quality mass education (Royal Education Council 2009).

***Little desire to be a teacher***

Until the 1980s, India had been the main source of teachers in Bhutan; then around 1989, as the government moved towards a more assertive stance on the need to identify and consolidate what is unique about Bhutan, these teachers were replaced by Bhutanese. The results have been mixed since most of these 'new' teachers had either been educated abroad or were educated in Bhutan but under the old Indian system of rote memorisation which was geared towards the passing of the Civil Service exam. Out of the 60 educators with whom I spoke, very few, less than a handful, had initially selected teaching as their career as corroborated by Dorji (2009):

Teaching has rarely been a popular job among young people in Bhutan. Except for a handful of those with a genuine interest in the noble service, the majority of the teacher candidates were drawn in more by circumstance than by interest. (142)

Rather, they were placed, if not thrown, into the classroom against their wishes and/or abilities. And, as they confessed, 'We teachers are the biggest critics of the profession'. One veteran teacher, clearly in sympathy with my confusion on the matter, said: 'Teachers don't know the value of what they are doing'. As a result, not one of the teachers I met had a child interested in becoming a teacher. Given that in most countries, teaching as a profession is the first step out of working-class status, and is viewed as a stable if not valuable career, I found this reluctance unusual. It seemed that in a country like Bhutan, which still retains a large portion of illiterate individuals, children would aspire to become teachers and parents would encourage their children to become educated pillars of society. When asked the reason for the disengagement with education, several answers emerged. Of particular significance was the lack of respect for hard work and, bizarrely, this included teaching. Other factors mentioned were teacher isolation, lack of compensation for work in remote



areas, lack of preparation, misplacement of teachers according expertise and as stated repeatedly, the low status of teachers (Dorji 2009).

### ***Teacher isolation***

Almost every other interview with an educator led to a discussion of the horrors of working in remote areas, isolated from colleagues, friends and family. Several teachers and principals openly complained of their own experiences and that of others of being stuck in remote areas for more than a decade when they had only agreed to the post for a year or two. At least six people I interviewed had been left for 10–18 years in such locations, requiring that they not only serve as the principal but also as one of the few, if not the sole, teacher of as many as 65 children of varying ages and abilities. Without colleagues or support many of these teachers sank into depression amid their frustration. When asked for another posting, their letters to the MOE went unanswered.

### ***Teacher rotation***

The government's answer to eradicating teacher isolation and encouraging service to rural areas was a controversial policy calling for teacher rotation (Editorial 2011). It is fascinating how many different versions of the rotation policy I heard. While all civil servants are supposed to rotate, teachers do it the most, according to some interpretations making the shift to a new school every three years. Teachers used the term 'forced migrants' to explain themselves, adding how, 'The policy often leads to the disintegration of families and delinquent children'. Others spoke of having to rent a place to live every time they moved to a new school, leaving their actual home vacant in town and at times unattended. The problem arises most frequently when a teacher is asked to rotate out of an area where their children are attending school. One principal explained, 'If there is not a local high school in the new location, we have to leave our children with relatives or friends. As a result many of our children grow up without proper guidance and often fail at school'. The irony of this not lost on the teachers. Several of the women teachers I spoke with were not married and I wondered if their thinking related to the issues just mentioned.

Other educators interpreted the rotation requirement quite differently. From their point of view, 'The purpose of the three-year-rule is to prevent frequent changing of schools. Only after three years can someone request a transfer to a new school'. Added to this was the caveat that after 18 years in one location rotation would be mandatory with new policies trying to cut this down to 16 and then 14 years. Even though this interpretation sounds far less strident than the former viewpoint, there was a growing awareness that if implemented across the land, it would cause a major exodus of teachers from the profession. Another added, 'Teachers will quit before they leave the comforts of life in Thimphu. The government will not be able to force them to work in more remote areas'.

One further critique of forced rotation noted how this might undermine the incentive to learn the new REC curriculum. More than one educator agreed that, 'If teachers know that they might rotate out of a Beacon school in a few years, perhaps into a school that is not using the new curriculum, why should we learn it in the first place?' Some of the more seasoned and committed interviewees claimed that these

teachers could serve as emissaries introducing the progressive programme into the traditional curriculum of their new school. Granted, in an ideal world this might be possible but many countered that this would take a very strong but flexible individual, one who fully understands the implications of their work and is willing and able to work with students and families from very isolated areas, often in one-room multi-aged school rooms.

### ***Civil Service exam***

Another policy issue centred on the powerful role of the Civil Service exam, not only in the way the curriculum was designed with foremost attention to passing it, but also how it shapes the mentality of who goes into teaching. The government is in the midst of considering requiring all teachers to take the Civil Service exam before qualifying for teaching. While standards are important, everyone knows that an exam is not the best way to measure a person's ability to work with children, to impart knowledge and to transform lives, especially young people from very rural villages, most of whom have parents who are illiterate and who barely have their basic needs met. But even if we agree that the exam could measure success with these children, I was told repeatedly, 'By requiring the Civil Service exam, many of those who pass it will actually *not* go into teaching but will choose to go into another line of work that they perceive as higher status than teaching once they get into the Civil Service'.

Another drawback to the Civil Service had to do with issues of educational equity and hence, lack of motivation to go beyond one's current level of attainment. According to several informants, 'Entrance to the Civil Service begins at the same level regardless of years of education. So a person with four years of college or university or a master's degree still enters at the same level with the same wage. So what is the incentive to continue on with our studies?' Another asked, 'If we assume that increased schooling equals increased knowledge and ability shouldn't there be some enhance pay/reward for additional years of learning?' Clearly, such a policy inhibits the possibility to build in increased years of teacher training. If there is no financial benefit to a profession that is already viewed as low status, who will go into teaching (Gordon 2005)?

### ***Infrastructure issues***

#### ***Overcrowding***

Every school I visited was in the process of turning away children in the second week of the new academic year due to overcrowding. It was not unusual to visit a primary school with 700 children. One had 900 students. Every school had parents pleading for access, whether a policeman, a military veteran or a mother humiliated by the prospect of being refused. In most cases, the nearest school was miles away and, as we soon found out upon the next visit, it too was closed for admission. Whether walking or using precious money for taxis (there is no public transportation) parents were run ragged back and forth across hills and valleys begging for their child to gain access. And some of this could have been prevented.

One of these nearby schools was closed five years ago by the MOE to be used as a curriculum centre by the Royal University. But nothing ever materialised. I was told with disgust, 'The site has remained unused all these years while the 800 students who were forced out have been dispersed to more distant schools that are already overcrowded. The abandoned school is now a shelter for animals'. When I inquired about the number of students who had sought access but were refused, I am told by more than one principal that 'There are no data on the number of students jumping from school to school'.

Polices are in place that try to prevent rural children from taking the place of students living in the towns. But the desire for some parents to position their children in less rural schools through distant 'relatives' creates havoc in an educational system still reeling from the reality that they now require all children to attend. Several of the schools I visited had up to 30% of the students registered as 'indirect dependents' (those whose parents do not work or live in the area). Meanwhile, schools in more remote areas are dying. One school had only nine students.

### *Classroom setting*

One result of admitting more children than there is space for is not only a larger number of students per class, but children squeezed into tiny dark spaces where at times three share one desk. While I was told that in some schools the class size is as high as 65, I only saw rooms where the highest number was 45. The government recommends 33 students per class. When I commented on the discrepancy, I was informed, 'Schools in the eastern regions, that were built after 2000, are larger than those built earlier and therefore have better facilities and more space'. Next time, I will head further east.

It was winter when this research was conducted, at the beginning of the school year, but the worst weather had passed, leaving the days brilliantly sunny and clear, though the evenings cold. Classrooms built of adobe with floors of clay tend to retain the cold. As a result, it was not uncommon for teachers and staff to gather to plan and prepare their lessons outside as well as allow children out of their freezing classrooms for part of the day to do their maths on small mats covering the dirt and dust. Very few children wore sweaters, jackets or warm clothes. I do not know how some of the children were able to read, write or interpret what was on the chalkboard as the rooms were so dark. Small slits in the walls do not make for sufficient 'natural light'.

### *Accessible space*

Most schools, even the newer ones, do not have an indoor space where children and teachers can gather for assembly, or group activities, such as performances. This means that whether it is the rain or sun beating down, they gather outside. Since every morning children gather for prayers, song and announcements as an entire school, having some place to accommodate them is important. Very, very few schools had steps to access the school, and most schools are built on hills, a reality in a country wedged between mountains and valleys. This was particularly odd at the newer schools where stacks of stones and bricks lay around in heaps. Would it not be possible to put the students and staff to work installing some rudimentary stairs?

Could this not be viewed as community service, or helping your school while getting a bit of exercise? Not that the students should be used as labourers but most primary schools have only one staff member other than teachers to assist in any and all capacities. There seemed to be lot of lip-service regarding students cleaning their own schools rather than hiring outside help but I failed to see the justification if it meant the schools remained half built or unsafe for those who might be less able to climb the hills.

#### *Lack of latrines*

Having worked for many years in Asia, I am respectful of children taking responsibility for their school. However, something seemed amiss as I watched children early one morning, girls in their plaid *kira's* and boys in their white sleeved *ghos*, cleaning out the canals that led from latrines with shovels and spades. Could they be allowed to switch into different clothes that are more easily washed so that they might be able to do a better job? Could this not have been done at the end of the day? But then again at least that particular school had demarcated toilets, meaning a hut with cement flooring with slits. We visited others that did not. Teachers, when interviewed, noted 'we are concerned about not having a place for the children to relieve themselves in privacy, especially the girls'. These children had to manage their private affairs in the bushes. This is not an issue of simple lack of infrastructure; this is a health issue. However, when I shared my concern with an official from the Ministry of Health, he told me that the situation I described was actually much healthier. I got the gist of his point and under some conditions I would agree. He, however, had both of his children in elite private schools where I am sure they had proper latrines.

#### *Lack of supplies*

Perhaps not surprisingly when I inquired with teachers regarding what they needed and wanted that would enhance their teaching and the classroom experience, many answered, 'more materials, especially manipulables, to work with the youngest children'. And I must admit every time I wrote on the blackboard, I felt guilty using up a precious commodity. Bits of white chalk, held in battered old tins, were attached to the walls of many classrooms. I never saw a rag or cloth to erase the board, though I did ask. Books are in short supply with children sharing texts. Naturally with the influx of children, to certain schools more than others, one ends up with a lack of desks and chairs. One school had to borrow furniture from another a few miles away as they literally did not have a place for the children to sit. Science materials were in short supply. Only one school had any science equipment and that was by default. It had once been a secondary school and when it was turned into an upper primary, some less desirable items were left behind, though the primary school had not yet figured out how to use the array of derelict glass beakers and utensils.

#### *Hooked into the world*

While all schools had electricity, it was not consistent, with black outs occurring at intervals. Several teachers expressed a desire to have electrical outlets in the actual

classrooms, 'We would love to be able to plug in tape recorders, computers, and various equipment to enhance the curriculum'. A few schools had computers but more than not it was one for the entire school or a half a dozen in a separate room. Internet access was minimal. Several administrators noted, 'It was difficult to figure out how to use computers equitably when the demand by teachers and students is so high'. Fulminating on this problem, one principal explained, 'In today's world access is not about children playing games but rather that the web has become a teaching and learning tool that all children need to know how to utilize'. However, when visiting one of the few secondary schools, a teacher was very concerned that 'Students, when given the choice, are opting to study IT and not economics'. This is not because it would give them a window on the world, but because it was perceived as easier and had the image of providing them access to an office job, a desk with a computer, an escape from labouring work. He painfully explained the dilemma for Bhutan, 'Given that an understanding of economics is fundamental to the survival and growth of Bhutan, what does this mean for the future of our country?'

### *Additional challenges*

In addition to these day-to-day difficulties, schools are beset with still more complex issues that they have not found a way to address. In particular, these include the education of migrant youth and children with special needs.

### *Migrant youth*

Migrant youth often travel with their parents who work on the roads as part of the National Road System. Given the abhorrent conditions of the roads, there will always be work to be done across this country until it is able to move towards paved roads. But even if and when this time arrives, the mountains will not necessarily cooperate and stop sending boulders and streams rushing down to crack and strain the passageways of people and cars. The children of these labourers have been encouraged to attend schools in the local area where their parents are working. However, teachers are challenged by not only the movement of these young people but also by the lack of a tracking system to note where they came from, their prior grade or ability level. To prevent this wrenching and sometimes chaotic situation, many parents choose to leave their children with grandparents as they travel around the country. As noted with teachers on rotation, this is not a satisfactory solution, even less so for labourers who move far more frequently. The dropout rate for these children is exceedingly high.

### *Children with special needs*

As might be clear by now, contending with regular schooling in Bhutan is challenging and yet we visited one school that had been given the responsibility of running two very different programmes for different sets of students out of the same site with one principal. The regular school already has 650 students. The second programme is for deaf children, 69 of them, and it is the only such school in the country. The complexity of operating both programmes is compounded by the lack of facilities, including no curriculum that addresses the needs of deaf youth and no trained staff

to do so. When I inquired why this school was selected for co-locating deaf youth, the response was a bit odd: ‘It is close to the capital so that it can be monitored. There is also a high school next door that provides boarding facilities so the deaf can continue on to grade twelve. It is cheaper for the government’. However, most Bhutanese are unaware that the school/programme is only for deaf youth. So, it is explained, ‘Parents with children who have other special needs that are unrelated to the deafness plead for them to be allowed to be admitted’. This has created an extremely difficult and emotionally wrenching situation for the staff as they turn away children for whom they have no expertise to serve. Still, as noted by the principal:

Bhutan is way behind in being able to identify and assist youth with basic learning problems. Any help in this area would be most welcome. We need strategies to work with the learning disabled, LD; they are left behind. Teachers lack the skills and with forty to fifty students in the class, it is impossible to attend to them.

I left feeling powerless and stunned.

### *Beyond the classroom*

Schooling does not happen in a vacuum – it requires the support and collaboration of parents and community, as well as a clear vision by society as to the purpose of education. And while Bhutan’s reputation might place it near Nirvana, it is also close to some of the major drug trafficking areas of the world. As a result, drugs have become a problem for the young, particularly in Thimphu, but not nearly as serious as alcoholism for adults, particularly men. ‘The biggest threat to the cohesion of Bhutanese families’, according to several interviews, ‘is the consumption of cheap alcohol’, which is readily available (Choden 2010). Broken homes, as noted by teachers and administrators alike, are apparently as high as 25% of all families. One teacher claimed, ‘eighty percent of this wreckage is attributed to heavy drinking’. In some situations, according to teachers and principals, ‘Children are afraid to go home and view school as a haven’.

Along with these claims, teachers complain that parents offer little guidance to children and do not prepare them adequately for school. When there is little money, how it is spent is significant. Some teachers stressed that ‘Up to fifty percent of parents do not have the money to buy food on a consistent basis’. Poverty, combined with illiteracy, can lead parents to wonder about the rationale for sending their children to school, especially if it takes them away from chores and responsibilities at home and requires them to walk up to two hours each way to school. Perhaps because of this ambivalence, some parents opt to send their sons to the monastery rather than regular school. The thinking being that they can learn *puja* (expressions of honour, worship and devotional attention) and be of greater benefit to the family and community.

### *The role of Buddhism*

Any reform effort within Bhutan is carried out within the overriding influence of Buddhist practices and institutions (Hershock 2004). While efforts proceed to create a national and universal system of public schooling, thousands of youngsters attend

monastic schooling, mostly for boys but including a significant number of girls. While this schooling exists ostensibly to prepare for monastic vocations, the explicitly spiritual approach is echoed among many Bhutanese leaders such as Prime Minister, Lyonchoen Jigme Y. Thinley when they voice the view that a standardised or modern curriculum contradicts the national movement towards the teaching of happiness (Colman 2011). The ongoing questions of coexisting monastic and secular schooling are discussed more thoroughly by Denman and Namgyel (2008) and lurked in the background of many conversations during my work in Bhutan and related preparation.

## **Conclusion**

This research has reinforced my strong belief in the importance of the interrelationship between the socio/economic, political and cultural contexts of education. Alluding to Kipnis' (2011) remarkable book on the increasing pressure placed on the Chinese educational system by expectant and ambitious parents, we cannot help but wonder if a similar educational desire will be cultivated among Bhutanese youth and, if so, to what ends. Given that this is the first generation of young people provided with mass education in a basically feudal country whose parents for the most part never attended formal school, one cannot help but pause to take in the significant role of education in the future of this small, but strategically placed, country. However, education does not operate in isolation, nor can society's challenges be solved through education alone.

Near the culmination of the fieldwork, a few days before I was to leave Bhutan, I was asked to compile a report and present it to the REC in a day-long seminar organised around a discussion of the findings. As I glanced over the agenda, I realised that many of the questions they hoped to discuss were also in my report. They were clearly not ignorant of the challenges facing educational reform. What was viewed as unusual was that my findings so closely mirrored these questions and that the my research uncovered conditions and concerns that they had not realised would be so candidly vocalised. The poignancy of the exchange that day was not lost on those who participated. Some of the questions asked that day, and many still unanswered, include: What is the purpose of education in Bhutan? In what ways will it transform this society? Since in the past only the elite received an education and then entered the Civil Service soon after, what are the expectations for today's youth and their families? How will increased education potentially contribute to an oversupply young people wanting access to office work where they do not dirty their white cuffs (part of the traditional dress for men)? If these jobs are not forthcoming, how will their confusion, if not resentment, be addressed? How is the educational system inadvertently contributing to the emptying out of the rural areas, not only because schooling is perceived as better in the towns but because the work that has to be done in the countryside is viewed as unimportant and degrading? What is the trade-off between losing the labour and control of your child to the distant and unknown institution of school?

One of the main roles of REC is to not only begin to understand how to address these questions by providing adequate and relevant education but also to convince parents and communities that such schooling is worth the investment and that it will not take their children away from the values and traditions that they hold so dearly.

To do this, the REC reforms must reach far beyond curricular changes, embracing the conditions in which teachers work as well as the attitudes held society at large. This research offers a view on the challenges being faced by one small, but strategically placed, Himalayan Kingdom. Perhaps through this lens we can better understand some of the contradictions that emerging economies face as they move towards mass education. Based on interviews and site visits in schools and communities in several regions of Bhutan, this paper explores how the country is attempting to create a form of national schooling that incorporates the traditional values that are perceived as making the Dragon Kingdom special, if not unique, in its search for Gross National Happiness.

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