

Contextual complexities shaping education policies in Bhutan: The role of culture, local knowledge and social norms in the context of Bhutan's education policies.

Phuntsho Wangdi
P.hD Candidate
Chiang Mai University School of Public Policy
phuntsho_w@cmu.ac.th

ABSTRACT

Education has been crucial in transforming societies through people empowerment and engagement. Education systems are composed of transformative and transactional elements. The emergence of neoliberalism has increasingly exerted dominating influence over value and identity formation, often through or in connection with the reforms in educational policies. Many countries have been actively reforming their education policies in recent years because education reforms foster long-term growth and welfare.

The education policies in Bhutan have evolved to primarily meet national needs and sync with global trends. The country's rising engagements with the global community have significantly influenced its education policies, resulting in a gradual loss of sight of the local culture, values and norms. With globalisation, sharing policies and practices are pervasive. However, without careful attention to the critical ideas of contextualisation and appropriate recognition of the local value systems, yielding to foreign policy influences can be unfavourable in meeting the national goals.

There is a potential risk of losing the country's repository of value systems if the education policies are not adapted to re-emphasise the infusion of the core national values. Against the backdrop of education transformation programmes in Bhutan, this paper reviews the Quarterly Education Policy Guidelines from 1988 to 2020, which are considered the equivalent of policy documents in the absence of an Education Act. The paper argues on a loss of policy focus on local values to the burgeoning foreign influences for educational efficiencies. It reinforces an emphasis on the role of culture, local knowledge and traditional values in the education reform policies for Bhutan.

Keywords: Culture, local values, national ideologies, education, reform.

INTRODUCTION

Bhutan is a Himalayan country located south of China and north of India, with an area of 38,117 square kilometres. The country has a democratic constitutional monarchy form of government that commenced in 2008 after a peaceful transition from an absolute monarchy that ruled for over a century. It is administratively divided into 20 Districts that are further subdivided into 205 Blocks as a process of decentralisation to facilitate direct participation of the people in the decision-making of their development programmes. The population is 779,125 as of 2021, of which 52.0 percent represent males and 48.0 represent females (World Population Review, 2021).

Bhutan's education evolved as early as the 8th century with the visit of the renowned Buddhist Master Guru Padmasambhava. The introduction of the unique Bhutanese script by Denmatsemang from Tibet, a disciple of Guru Padmasambhava, paved the way for a system of learning based on Buddhist texts in Bhutan (Dukpa, 2016a). Until then, an oral transmission of teaching and learning of the Buddhist canons were prevalent. Since then, numerous religious personalities established temples, which became seats for teaching and learning. Drupthob Thangtong Gyalpo, who visited Bhutan in 1433, is believed to have introduced a vocational trade through his special craft of blacksmithing and the construction of iron chain bridges. The first formal monastic education commenced with the arrival of a Tibetan Lama Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, who is also regarded as the Founder of Bhutan in 1616. He established Cheri Dorji Den as a formal centre of monastic learning in 1621 with thirty novices. This means of education existed during the theocratic rule of Bhutan from 1616 to 1907 (Dukpa, 2016b). The monks were primarily prepared for future life and considered a social elevation, and enjoyed respect for the position of the privileged.

Modern education in the country commenced in 1961 with the establishment of the 1st Five Year Plan Programmes. Since then, a phenomenal progression has fuelled the country's socioeconomic development, resulting in incremental institutional growth in terms of the form, structure and density. In about six decades, the education system has scaled significant milestones. From barely 11 schools with about 400 students in 1961, the number has grown to about 515 (479 government and 36 private schools) with over 172,000 students and 9500 teachers in 2017 (PPD, 2017). The country is close to meeting its net primary enrolment (98.8%) and 96% for secondary school education (PPD, 2017). The net enrolment ratio for

higher secondary education (XI & XII) is 27%, and the gross enrolment ratio at the tertiary level is 24% (MoE, 2012).

Table 1: Educational Institutions in 2022

Table 3.2: Number of Schools, Institutes and Centres, 2022

| School/Institutes/Centres | Government | Private | Total |
|---|------------|-----------|------------|
| Early Childhood Development | | | |
| ECDD Centres ¹ | 433 | 58 | 491 |
| Schools Education | | | |
| Extended Classrooms | 63 | 0 | 63 |
| Primary Schools | 302 | 12 | 314 |
| Lower Secondary Schools | 59 | 1 | 60 |
| Middle Secondary Schools | 62 | 1 | 63 |
| Higher Secondary Schools | 71 | 21 | 92 |
| Special Institutes | 2 | 0 | 2 |
| Central Schools ² | 64 | 0 | 64 |
| Autonomous Schools | 69 | 0 | 69 |
| Schools with SEN Program | 32 | 0 | 32 |
| Sub-total | 724 | 35 | 759 |
| Tertiary Education | | | |
| Tertiary Institutes within Bhutan | 15 | 3 | 18 |
| Technical Training Institutes | | | |
| Technical/Vocational Institutes | 6 | 0 | 6 |
| Institute of Zorig Chusum | 2 | 0 | 2 |
| Sub-total | 8 | 0 | 8 |
| Other Forms of Education | | | |
| Monastic Education (Lobdras and Shedras) ³ | 79 | ... | 79 |
| Continuing Education Centres | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Non-Formal Education Centres ⁴ | 430 | 0 | 430 |
| Sub-total | 509 | 1 | 510 |

*Note:*¹ Private ECDD includes ECDD under NGO, Private & Corporation.
² Central Schools and Autonomous School already counted under general Schools.
³ The data is only inclusive of lobdras and shedras.
⁴ The Non-Formal Education Centers include Community Learning Centers as well.
Source: Education Management Information System, MoE.

Source: NSB, 2022

The school education structure comprises 11 years of free basic education from Pre-Primary to class 10. Primary education (PP - VI) has a seven-year education cycle followed by six years of secondary education comprising two years of lower secondary (VII-VIII); two years of middle secondary (IX-X) and two years of higher secondary (XI-XII) education. Education is free for all school-going aged children (5 years and above) and supports educational completion until class 12 and tertiary education programmes are offered based on merit.

The private schools are also supported by the government through the provision of business tax holidays, textbooks and student scholarships. The State also offers scholarships to outstanding students and those from economically disadvantaged families to pursue their dreams in institutions overseas and within the country. Additionally, His Majesty the King provides the Royal *Kidu* (Grant) to disadvantaged students through scholarships, finances and education.

The Royal University of Bhutan (RUB) established in 2003 is the overall custodian of tertiary education in the country with ten institutions affiliated under its wing. The Khesar Gyalpo University of Medical Sciences of Bhutan (KGUMSB) was established in 2013 with two constituent institutions – the National Institute of Traditional Medicine and the Royal Institute of Health Science (Schofield, 2016). Additionally, there are currently two autonomous

institutions - the Royal Institute of Management (RIM) & Royal Institute for Tourism & Hospitality (RITH) offering tertiary courses.

The education system has primarily served Bhutan's transition from a medieval nation to a modern state of the 21st century. Bhutan's friendly neighbours, particularly India have played a significant role in setting up its educational landscapes and building human resources since the initial phases of the national development programmes in 1961. The progressive advancements in global interactions through trade, infrastructures, education, transnational exchanges, and accessibility to information have changed the dynamics of Bhutan's education policies. As the country increasingly interacted as an active participant in the global community, the alliances and interactions with other nations naturally influenced the internal policies and goals. Despite the comforts and conveniences of neoliberalism, it has also caused consequential impacts through cultural erosion, social inequities, an unsustainable environment, and a burgeoning capitalist economy which has eventually affected the wellbeing and happiness at individual, community, national and global levels. The educational systems have also started developing competitive cultures to suit the consumerist model of the economy. These factors have played out a negative consequences on the role of culture, local knowledge and social norms.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Bhutan is a tiny Himalayan Kingdom with fascinating stories and these stories do not refer to a wishful fantasy and euphoric imagination but to a purposeful driven national dream carefully orchestrated through its vision and a sense of mission. The country has scaled its impasses from a feudalistic and landlocked medieval country to a democratic modern state. In terms of nation-building, Bhutan has taken a progressive flight from one of the least developed countries to a developing nation of the 21st century under the wise and farsighted leadership of the Wangchuck

Dynasty. The heart of these dreams and transformation is buttressed by the national values and cultures as a unifying element of communal strength, social cohesion, national stability and progressive identity.

The founder of Bhutan's nation-state, Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal introduced the '*Choed - Syid gi Zungdrel*' (religious and temporal) system of governance system in the country in the 17th century. As a theocratic and temporal ruler of the country, Zhabdrung was instrumental in establishing a social, religious, cultural and political order based on the precepts of *Driglam Namzha* that is predominantly derived from the Buddhist canons. *Driglam* means the way of maintaining order, while *Namzha* is referred to the concept or system. In the years that followed, the concept of *Driglam Namzha* became the foundational anchor that transpired into a vision of 'education with character' as a critical element for national sovereignty, integrity and unity. *Driglam Namzha* can be understood as a system of orderly and cultured behaviour and is regarded as a national code of etiquette in Bhutan.

In the early 1970s, His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck, the Fourth King, espoused the concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH) as the principal development philosophy for Bhutan. GNH is a development paradigm that echoes the Buddhist tenets of improving the physical and mental human conditions through the promotion of socio-economic development, conservation of the environment, strengthening good governance and preservation of culture, tradition and values. GNH, thus, articulates the State's endeavour to create a fair and harmonious social condition of well-being and happiness by underpinning the ideals of universalism, equal entitlements of citizenship, social inclusion, and equity (Givel, 2020). Education is recognised as one of the state's most significant machinery to operationalise the philosophy of GNH and thus, mandates the Education Sector to provide a purposeful and wholesome education.

Drawing inspiration from the philosophy of GNH, the Education Policy of 1974 explicitly emphasised preserving the country's rich cultural and spiritual heritage while seeking to reap the fruits of science and technology. Education was also mandated to be pragmatic and realistic to align with the planned development goals by closely linking with actual manpower requirements of the country at different levels in various fields to avoid the problem of "unemployment of the educated" in future (ED 1974, p. 6). The Education Policy of 1984

further elaborated and encapsulated education provisions to strengthen spiritual, cultural and traditional values and contribute to national and social cohesion, meet manpower requirements of the country and avert the incidence of educated unemployment (Thinley, 2016).

Bhutan Vision 2020 document underscores a holistic concept of education that inculcates an awareness of the nation's unique cultural heritage and ethical values and universal values that develop the capacity of the young people. This requires a system of education that grooms the citizens to be intellectually bright, physically enterprising, emotionally mindful, and morally upright (MoE, 2012). Further, underscoring the state's responsibility of enhancing well-being and happiness through provisions of knowledge, values and skills, the Constitution (RGOB, 2008) states that state:

Shall endeavour to provide education for the purpose of improving and increasing the knowledge, values, and skills of the entire population, with education being directed towards the full development of the human personality (p19).

The Bhutan Education Blueprint 2014-2024 (MoE, 2014) developed in 2014, envisions creating an 'educated and enlightened society of GNH, built and sustained on the unique Bhutanese values of *tha dam-tsig ley gye-drey* ' (sublime statement of genuine commitment to others and the truth of causality or interdependence) (p.63). This vision is slated to be achieved by improving its four thematic areas of access, equity, system efficiency and quality. The national education vision thus, reinforces the Bhutanese values of creating a harmonious social condition of citizenship, interdependence, solidarity, and inclusion.

The National Education Policy - 2018 (Draft) further underpins the importance of nurturing a responsible, participative, and productive citizenry by preparing them to become knowledgeable, skillful, creative, innovative, enterprising, and capable of responding to national needs and emerging global trends (PPD, 2018). These aspirations entrust the education sector with the sacred responsibility of imparting a world-class contemporary education blended with respect to upholding and promoting the conventional educational values of the country. The task is to tread the middle path approach by carefully incorporating the knowledge and skills of the 21st century and ensuring the continuity of transmitting the country's traditional values to the younger generations.

In recent times, His Majesty Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, the Fifth King of Bhutan, reinforced and reverberated those time-tested values by asserting the education system to embed the Bhutanese youths with a conviction and sense of pride as Bhutanese by grounding them in the country's history, culture, tradition, and value system.

As we prepare to educate and equip them with competencies for the twenty-first century, we must equally prioritise their holistic development so that they become caring, dependable, and honest human beings as well as patriotic citizens. We need to embed in them the conviction and sense of pride as a Bhutanese by grounding them in our country's history, culture, tradition, and value system (Kuensel, 2021).

The national aspirations elucidate the importance of developing a dynamic, robust, and progressive education system that not only meets the national goals and objectives but also scales up educational performances comparable to international standards. In pursuance of the vision, the education sector endeavours to develop sound policies that enable the creation of a knowledge-based GNH society with locally rooted and globally competent citizens (MoE, 2014).

However, the repository of Bhutanese values which is interwoven with Buddhist ethics and culture practiced in the country have suffered a sacrificial fate in the face of neoliberalism and international interests (Lhamo, 2019; Anspoka and Jasjukevica, 2010). The influence of Western ideologies such as individual rights, independence, self-esteem, competition, and psychological individualism has seeped into Bhutanese societies. This has militated against altruism, community consciousness, social responsibility, compassionate considerations, meditation, ethical training and wisdom that are convergent with the Buddhist precepts, and universal human development is losing ground (Ura, 2009). The local cultural ethos has decreased over time, while indigenous knowledge is being reframed within the globalist culture (Jackson, 2016).

Education has been crucial in transforming societies through people empowerment and engagement. Education systems are composed of transformative and transactional elements. The emergence of neoliberalism has increasingly exerted dominating influence over value and identity formation, often through or in connection with the reforms in educational policies.

Many countries have been actively reforming their education policies in recent years because education reforms foster long-term growth and welfare.

The education policies in Bhutan have evolved to primarily meet national needs and sync with global trends. The country's rising engagements with the global community have significantly influenced its education policies, resulting in a gradual loss of sight of the local culture, values and norms. With globalisation, sharing policies and practices are pervasive. However, without careful attention to the critical ideas of contextualisation and appropriate recognition of the local value systems, yielding to foreign policy influences can be unfavourable in meeting the national goals (RGOB,2009).

Therefore, under the educational values of imparting quality with efficiency, educational policies should follow the fundamental principles of the new public administration; take historical and cultural backgrounds into account, strengthen the respect for and the recognition of ethnical culture, and address cultural ethos as a fundamental policy value goal. However, despite the reforms, Bhutan's education system is grappling with the challenges of providing contemporary and conventional education.

There is a potential risk of losing the country's repository of value systems if the education policies are not adapted to re-emphasise the infusion of the core national values. Against the backdrop of education transformation programmes in Bhutan, this paper reviews the Quarterly Education Policy Guidelines from 1988 to 2020, which are considered the equivalent of policy documents in the absence of an Education Act. The paper argues for a loss of policy focus on local values to the burgeoning foreign influences for educational efficiencies.

The key research questions are:

- What are the influences of neoliberalism on Bhutan's education policies in relation to the potential risks of straining the culture, tradition and social norms?
- What are the policy alternatives to redeem the loss and strengthen national values?

METHODOLOGY

The paper aimed to primarily study the influences of neoliberalism and foreign ideologies on educational policies and practices in Bhutan. Hence, hosts of pre-existing texts and literature on educational philosophies and government education policy documents were collected and referred to. This paper adopted a qualitative documentary analysis approach as the research method.

Method: Every research procedure has an internal organisational logic. The division of research into stages ensures the quality of the work being done and assures the production of scientific knowledge. This documentary research first identified the research problem and defined the problem statement. Second, in the analysis, a thematic approach of the study was adopted to slot the data into various reform periods against the global trend. Through literature reviews, policy gaps were identified, and observations of patterns in policy transfers and borrowing were identified.

Data collection: The process of document analysis starts with finding documents for an authentic, credible, representative, and meaningful study. The paper looks more broadly at the education policy guidelines of Bhutan to mainly find out the trends of Western policy influences on the core Bhutanese values. The approach is to identify fundamental policy changes from 1988 to 2020 by referring to some 34 editions of the Education Policy Guidelines and Instructions (EPGIs) and other national education policy documents. Hence, the official website of the Ministry of Education in Bhutan was the primary source for data collection. Authentic and credible government documents such as the Royal Edict issued in December 2020 by His Majesty the King of Bhutan; Bhutan 2020 document, Bhutan Education Blueprint 2014-2024, Education Policy Guidelines (1988-2020), and National Education Policy – 2012 (Draft) from the education archives of Ministry of Education, Bhutan was used in the desk reviews. In a few cases, personal communication was done by contacting individuals directly involved in policymaking.

Data analysis: The study relied upon the thematic approach of exploring and examining the influences of Western nations by slotting into time series from 1988 to 2020 based on the primary references of Education Policy Guidelines and Instructions (EPGIs). In some sixty-odd decades, several policy initiatives were carried out to transform Bhutan's education systems and practices. The idea was to introspect into the factors and conditions featured in the

policy directives of Bhutan's education and how they impacted the local cultural values. The discussion segment of this paper highlights some principal policy influences through Westernisation. It concludes by pointing to some core Bhutanese values that are critical for infusion in the education reform initiatives of Bhutan.

DISCUSSION

How have neoliberalism and foreign ideologies strained the education policies of Bhutan causing potential risks to the local culture, knowledge and social norms?

Neoliberalism

The concept of neoliberalism alludes to the 19th - 20th century ideas associated with free-market capitalism for economic resurgence following the aftermath of wars and depression. The concept is a political reappearance of adoption of practices and culture of the Western countries by societies and nations in other parts of the world either through compulsive and influential means or through voluntary emulations. Neoliberalism reached much of the world as part of the process of colonisation and continues to be a significant cultural and ideological phenomenon (MDG Monitor, 2017). Today, neoliberalism is still a domineering phenomenon spurred by globalisation that has linked the world in ways that an idea and action in one part is influenced by a similar reaction in other parts of the world (Giddens, 1990, Hursh, 2006. Dolowitz and Marsh, 2000).

The idea of neoliberalism was ushered in Bhutan with an introduction of the Western education model in early 1914 with the first modern school established in Haa District in Western Bhutan. Prior, some prominent Bhutanese families have been sending their children to study Western education in the Jesuit missionary boarding schools within the borders of Northern India. With the establishment of a hereditary monarchy in Bhutan in 1907, successive Kings not only invited several Jesuit missionaries from Canada and Europe to establish schools in the country but also sent students on government scholarships abroad. The Jesuit missionaries were highly instrumental in spearheading the promotion of secular modern education in the country. In the succeeding years, as the system progressed and expanded, foreign teachers were recruited, predominantly from India in the initial years of the establishment of modern schools. Over

time, teachers from England, Switzerland, Canada, and Australia were invited to assist as volunteer teachers (Dorji, 2016). Subsequently, many Bhutanese teachers and students were sent to pursue pre-service and in-service training and qualification up-gradation programmes. The expansion of these regular contacts and exchanges with educationists, experts and students overseas contributed to bringing foreign ideas.

The trend of a 'networked society' is because of progressive advancements in global trade, infrastructures, education, transnational exchanges, and accessibility to information. This has helped in the mobilization of resources, promoting people-to-people contacts and enhancing information and knowledge flow across the globe. In the contemporary world, global market liberalism and free trade policies are linked to an ideology marked by broadmindedness or tolerance for diverse social practices, and concern for civil liberties and social welfare (Hursh,2006). In recent times, globalization has been referenced increasingly for its ability to integrate and assimilate the world as a smaller globe with a wider spectrum and larger networks (Lingarda, 2010). In other words, globalization has intensified worldwide social relations and linked distance localities in such a way that an ideology and action in one part is influenced by a similar reaction in the other (Giddens, 1990).

The practice of policy transfer has been widespread among industrialized and developed countries which triggered subsequent policy transfers in developing countries facilitated mainly by Western thoughts, generally spurred by international players and policy entrepreneurs (Marginson, 1999). The expanding engagements with international development partner agencies and donors have substantially influenced the incorporation of foreign ideologies in the education policies and practices of Bhutan. Dorji (2016) elucidates that the Overseas Development Agency (ODA) of the United Kingdom, the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), the World Bank, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the United Nations Capital Development Fund (UNCDF), World Food Programme (WFP), and the Swiss Development Cooperation (SDC) were some prominent international development partners for Bhutan (p. 114).

However, the global outlook of education that seeks economic efficiencies and neoliberal governmentality (Roberts, 2010) has posed challenges to an inclusive, equitable and quality education. The challenge is driven by a host of policy factors ranging from socio-cultural contexts, political status, and economic strength and is further aggravated by the influences of

globalization, policy emulations and policy transfers which are attributed to trigger policy changes. This alludes to the myopic educational visions and strategic designs to meet the demands of the burgeoning consumerist economy which is responsible for stimulating social inequities and erosion of culture local traditions and social norms.

The following segment discusses the impacts of foreign ideas on the education policies of Bhutan.

Cultural imperialism

The introduction of English as the medium of instruction in Bhutanese schools in 1962 popularised hosts of subjects such as social science, humanities, science, and business which are taught in the English language. While the introduction of English as the medium of instruction in schools facilitated many advantages, it triggered the overshadowing of *Dzongkha* – the national language which is instrumental in imparting core national values and cultural teachings. Today, English has gained popularity and is linked to social status as the language of the elites and is considered a better means to access training and employment (Rinchhen and Singye, 2016). Additionally, the economic expansionist policy in the 1980s and 1990s characterised by surging modern education and changing social attitudes amongst the newly educated triggered the promotion of a cosmopolitan value in the localities (Munro, 2016).

New Public Management (NPM) Paradigm

The New Public Management (NPM) paradigm founded on the principles of the result-oriented public management, efficiency and cost-effectiveness has transformed education into a business-like enterprise hinged upon efficiencies, effectiveness, and productivity (Chinnammai, 2005; Okoli, 2012). Systemic-wide, the education sector has adopted concepts such as result-based education, outcome-based education, and competency-based education that focus on developing intellectual domains and neglect other vital aspects of character building of the human personality (Marx and Engels, 1952; Hatcher, 2003; Peters, 1994). The focus of education on intellectual development has upset moral and ethical effects and subsequently transpired into a culture of competition and a merit-based education system in Bhutan.

Efficiency in education has come under considerable scrutiny from the public in the past several years. Where educators have tended to view educational performance in terms of inputs to the system, namely the number of resources and government funding that is provided in comparison to others, there are observers who view performance in terms of outputs. Technically, efficiency is alluded to in terms of measurable outcomes such as high student retention rates, graduation rates and more vocational utility to educational programming. These dimensions are important to understanding the relationship between student performance and the quality of citizens. Instead, policymakers have typically relied on strategies aimed at pressuring students and teachers for higher performances in high-stakes testing rather than looking at benchmarks for character education (Planning Commission, 1999)

Internationalisation of education governance

The authoritative influence of international agencies on education has become a generalised phenomenon giving rise to the increasing internationalisation of education governance (Gundara and Portera, 2008). The evaluation of education systems has become a characteristic theme in the intervention policies of government machinery and international organisations concerned with monitoring the relationship between performance and quality. Numerous recursive comparative evaluations such as the Programme for International Students Assessment (PISA), International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) have sprouted over the last 20 years (Robertson, 2000). The international assessment systems have cast a direct impact on educational policies, and the less satisfactory the result emerging from international comparisons has been, the more they have affected policy decisions. There has been an increasing globalised logic of education underpinned by the pressure to be globally competitive in a dynamic knowledge-based economy (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2008). This transpired into the opening of elite private schools, charter schools, specialised schools, and private tuitions (Koh, 2013).

Following this bandwagon, Bhutan participated in the Programme for International Student Assessment for Development (PISA-D) in 2019 in reading, mathematics, and science to confront a dismal outcome (National Project Centre, 2019). Notwithstanding a significantly below OECD average outcome, the participation in international assessment programmes that

breeds a market-economy-based education system is a contrasting phenomenon to Bhutan's development concept of Gross National Happiness. This agenda has threatened the social-democratic principles as educational views have shifted from a public good – central to civil society to a view of public education as a safety net operating in a system characterised by competition, stratification, and individualism (Roberts, 2010).

It should also be noted that the concept of educational efficiency is often (inappropriately) used interchangeably with effectiveness and hence, misguided the policymakers and educators (Hulme,2005). While efficiency refers to a comparison of inputs against their related outputs, effectiveness is judging whether a specific set of resources result in a positive scale of the effect on achievement (NSB,2017). Educational efficiency is also affirmed by looking at the greater social returns through meaningful employment and social participation which are often ignored or remained in a blind spot from education performance reviewers and auditors.

Contrarily, studies have recommended a holistic approach to educational planning that encompasses solving problems related to poverty, crime, substance abuse, child neglect, unmet health needs, housing shortages, interpersonal violence, etc. which were largely ignored by the reform policies and consequently, the reforms yielded little in the way of sustained improvement. This case mirrors the patterns observed in many countries. This is because education policy has focused on raising academic standards and increasing accountability but largely ignored the social and economic conditions that impact school environments and learning opportunities for students. The emphases on standards and accountability through high-stakes testing have left many of the schools that serve low-income children mired in persistent failure.

21st-century education

The educational concepts, policies and practices have rather taken a circular pattern as influenced by the discourses of academia. The early education system was mostly oriental in nature with a focus on values and life worlds. The widespread inequity and unpreparedness of children for their livelihoods within their community and beyond in the rapidly modernizing world have apparently paved the way for policy sermons such as school consolidation, professionalism of teaching, modernization of facilities, rationalization of school governance

and standardized curricular changes with testing systems that have subsequently become an ‘educational consciousness’ of the 21st century.

Since multifarious factors are at interplay to achieve educational goals, alluding high importance to just the efficiency aspect and ignorance of culture, knowledge and values would impair the goals of holistic education. To be compatible, a balance would need to be struck between maximizing educational efficiency with maximizing educational values. Hence, it is important to develop a supportive, integrated, and inclusive educational policy (Fraser, 1997). Limited provision of vocational subjects and a concomitant lack of structured alternative pathways to support students with low intellectual competency but high psychomotor skills have bred a trace of youths with complacency who yield to anti-social activities (MoE, 2014). The challenge of education has been to operate either ahead or in tandem with the economically pragmatic direction to support marketization and a consumerist economy. Education reforms have been geared towards serving the needs of the labour market, stimulating the economy and promoting global competitiveness. Thus, the current education policies lay strong emphasis on improving performances, efficiencies, and productivity to fuel economic growth and social progress (BCSEA,2019).

This idea was primarily based on the concept of ‘liberal individualism’ with a focus on autonomous individuals to actualize his/her human potential and reduce socio-economic inequities in both rural and urban settings; yet, against the face of global capitalism, inequities have remained a challenge. This is largely because, schooling is centrally organized through a system focused upon an assumption of the metropolitan and rolled out to other areas without change to meet the local communities’ needs (PPD, 2021). This system of governance and assessment that ubiquitously quantifies educational achievement with inter and intra-national comparisons has symbolically created a stereotypical problem and image of education (World Education Forum, 2000).

The ability to access digital devices and the internet has increasingly become a crucial component of daily life, and education on online platforms has also increasingly become a norm. Students that have access to educational resources are more likely to feel motivated and succeed in their academic achievements (BCSEA, 2019). Inversely, access to digital education using the internet and technology is also a significant contributor to social injustice and inequity (Lipman, 2006). The introduction of the internet and its subsequent exposure to an influx of

information through the digital medium have exposed the country’s population to foreign influences and the erosion of value systems.

In a nutshell, neoliberalism and foreign ideologies have influenced Bhutan’s education policies as follows:

| Features | Years | Influence on Bhutan’s education policies |
|--|--------------|---|
| Neoliberalism | 1960 - 1970 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Adoption of Indian education systems based on the British colonial education system. - English as the medium of instruction - Curricular reforms for economic productivity. |
| New Public Management | 1980-1990 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Privatization of schools - Standardization - Ranking Systems - Educational pathways and diversification |
| Internationalisation of educational governance | 1990 to 2000 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Participation in global ranking systems - PISA - Exploring Cambridge systems - Quest for International Baccalaureate systems |
| 21 st century education | 2000 - | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Democratic education - Competency based education, - Merit-based education - Entrepreneurship and vocational education |

Source: EPGI, 1998-2022

SOLUTION: A call for the return to values of education and belonging.

The advancements and adoption of scientific technology and the market economy have brought about a fundamental shift in people’s values and beliefs, attitudes, and expectations in response to the changing economic and social circumstances. The education policies from the end of World War II until 1973 strongly emphasised economic development that surpassed considerations for the ethical, spiritual, cultural, and moral aspects of education. Ezechieli (2003) postulates that the Western world’s education model based on economic growth is both unsustainable in the long term for rich countries and inappropriate for developing ones because of its flawed principles and perceptions (p. 33). This education system degrades fundamental human values and grounds one to extreme individualism. The unfortunate consequence is that children raised in such an atmosphere grow up without respecting authority and tradition as

they are subjected to believe in their rightness from an early age. Such feelings often degenerate into arrogance and rebellion.

The earlier education policies in Bhutan (EPGIs 1998 to 2000) indicate a strong emphasis on national values and ethos, which was subsequently overshadowed by the Western ideology of neo-liberalism (EPGIs 2000 – 2020). In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the national graduates' orientation programme used to have two full weeks of theoretical and practical lessons on Bhutan's values and *Driglam Namzha*. Over time, the programme was drastically reduced to a day-long session with PowerPoint presentations, which is concerning (T.Dorji, personal communication, 27th April 2022). The Special Committee for Education Report (2016) of the National Council of Bhutan substantiated a gap between the desired learning outcomes in the inculcation of values and the actual implementation of the programmes (p.18).

Bhutan is considered the last bastion of Mahayana Buddhism since the rich and splendid culture that flourished in Sikkim, Tibet, Nepal, and Ladakh is continually degrading due to foreign influences. Faced with the domineering surge of Westernisation, the potential risk of losing the fundamental value systems that have shaped the country's sovereignty and identity looms large. Hence, as a vehicle for the transmission of cultural heritage from one generation to the next and the means of ensuring the historical consciousness of the people, the Special Committee recommended strengthening values education by developing a curriculum to promote national consciousness and pointed toward reintroducing *namthars* - spiritual biography (p.19).

It is befitting to reinstate an emphasis on the inculcation of *Driglam Namzha* (discipline etiquettes) and *Sampa Semkey* (equanimity of the mind), *tha dam-tsig* and *ley gye-drey* (sublime statement of genuine commitment to others and the truth of causality or interdependence) and *sem dang rig-pa* (an unbiased clarity of the reality of mind). Values such as *sem dagzin thabni* (to take care of their minds); *sem go-choep zoni* (to be mindful of the body, speech and mind); *sem dring-di zoni* (to be strong-minded) could be reinstated as a part of the rigid school programmes (Thinley, 2016) In terms of individual self-discipline, a predominantly monastic practice of *domba nga* or the five lay Buddhist undertakings that include not killing; not taking what is not given to you rightfully; not lying; not consuming intoxicants and avoiding sexual misconduct can be incorporated as a school curriculum (Givel, 2020).

The secular education system has the potential to borrow the Buddhist precepts of *michoe tsangma chudru* (sixteen virtuous acts of social piety) and *lhachoe gewa chu* (ten pious acts) founded in 1652 by the first temporal and spiritual ruler Deb Umzed Tenzin Drugyel (Karim and Dorji, 2018). The traditional Bhutanese values not only address individual self-discipline and the conduct of interpersonal relationships but also delineate the responsibility of considering the well-being of all sentient beings (Wangyal, 2021). An inculcation of those profound local values that uphold principles of interdependence, causal relationships, harmonious living, unity in diversity, sustainability, and goals for happiness would subsequently trigger an unwavering commitment to the *tsa-wa-sum* (King, country, and people) and the realisation of a holistic development paradigm of *Gyalong Gakid Pelzom* - Gross National Happiness (RGOB, 2008).

Figure 1: The GNH mandala, representing a holistic educational paradigm.



Source: MoE (2014)

Ura (2009) posits that the idea of value creation is about ‘creating the emergence of a set of beliefs and attitudes as a person’s character and personality unfold so that their beliefs will influence their behaviour and actions in a positive manner and direction (p.2). Therefore, the education sector is responsible for including traditional values in school practices. There are global educational initiatives like positive psychology education, mindfulness education, sustainable education, emotional intelligence, and wellbeing education that align with the GNH

Mandala to cultivate the natural, social, cultural, intellectual, academic, aesthetic, spiritual and moral dimensions of a child's personality (Powdyel, 2008). Hence, revitalising Bhutanese values could be seen as a realignment of conventional global educational policies and practices.

CONCLUSION

An end goal of a good education policy is to evoke the concept of the essential goodness of children, that humans have free will, the ability to reason, aesthetic sensibility, and instincts of moral conscience. The idea is to lay emphasis on nature and the essential goodness of humans, understanding, and education as a process for developing human character to foster social and emotional well-being. The national goals resonate with the global trend of nurturing a knowledge-based economy that values interdependence, spirituality and respect for the environment, inclusiveness, and sustainability.

It is undeniable that Buddhism plays an integral role in the Bhutanese context from historical, cultural, and educational angles. Hence, the foundation of Bhutan's education system is laid on the Buddhist precepts to sharpen one's knowledge and skills for livelihood but also impart as a tool for the development of sound human character. This transpires that the education reformation policies incorporate the cherished precepts of core Bhutanese values whilst grooming its citizens with modern Western ideas to be knowledgeable, skilled, enterprising, and capable of responding intelligently to the challenges of 21st-century daily life. The reform agenda has an opportunity to return to a humanistic form of education that is sensitive to place, materially and spiritually connected to a broad vision of interdependence and cooperation, and modelled on the inclusive, intimate, and caring structure of the social and cultural system of Bhutan.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the following for their valuable contributions in the process of my work:

1. Piyapong Boossabong, Assistant Director, School of Public Policy, Chiang Mai University for his valuable support and insights during the study.
2. Lakchayaporn Thansiri, Degree program Officer, School of Public Policy, Chiang Mai University for her administrative and logistics support.
3. Kezang Yangden, Dhendup Norbu Wangdi and Trashi Yangzom Wangdi (My family) for bearing with me and for their patience at home.
4. All my personal and professional friends for their consistent guidance and support in my endeavours.
5. The first version of this manuscript was presented at the 6th International Conference on Public Policy (ICPP6), organized from June 27-29,2023 at the Faculty of Arts of Toronto Metropolitan University in Toronto, Ontario. I would like to thank all the scholars who provided feedback at the Conference.

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