

# Inclusive Education in Bhutan: A Small State with Alternative Priorities

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*Bhutan is a 'small state' according to the World Bank, and therefore categorized as fragile and vulnerable to local and global challenges. However, since the 1960s, when the country first engaged in 'modernization' development and global politics, Bhutan has been anything but fragile and helpless. The Royal Government's focus on sustainable development, cultural heritage, and Gross National Happiness as a template for all social policies has empowered Bhutan to become a leader in the alternative development of small states. This article explores Bhutanese development in one specific area: inclusive education. As Bhutan has shifted its educational policy from elite monasticism to secular 'Education for All', issues of educating a heterogenous student population led to the development of inclusive education policies. This article examines how equity-based educational policies provide an alternative to economic-based policy prescriptions of the World Bank for small states.*

## Introduction

Nestled amongst the towering peaks of the Himalayas, the country of Bhutan navigates itself in the twenty-first century in a cautious and calculated manner. In many ways, the difficult topography of Bhutan has kept it isolated from global movements both positive and negative. Bhutan was never colonized by Europe, engaging only with its immediate neighbors of Nepal, Sikkim, India, Tibet, and later Britain. Today, Bhutan has become a country in the global network and tasked with re-negotiating its identity and place in both regional and international imaginations. A specific recent development in Bhutan has been its education system, having only begun in earnest since the 1960s (Namgyel, 2011). As secular, government-initiated schooling came to prominence and eclipsed elite Buddhist monastic education since the 1960s, issues and dilemmas were raised in Bhutan – amongst other things – as to how a mass education system can benefit an *inclusive* society. In this paper, I argue that the manner in which Bhutanese educational policies addresses this concern indicates a complex engagement with the limitations and possibilities of being a “small state” according the World Bank (2012) in that the World Bank frames education in small states in terms of human capital development. I also argue that Bhutanese educational policy and goals defies the characterization of small states as fragile and vulnerable (Mayo, 2010), and ultimately presents an alternative to economically-driven development policies for small states (World Bank & Commonwealth Secretariat, 2000).

Education has been expressed as a human right through United Nations agenda-setting such as the Jomtien 'Education for All' Conference (UN Inter-Agency Commission, 1990), the Dakar World Education Forum (UNESCO, 2000), and the Millennium Development Goals (UN, 2000). While reactions and effectiveness of conceptualizing education as a right for every child has been mixed (Lewin, 2005; World Bank, 2006), most nations have been engaged in building their educational capacity. The reasons for engaging in educational development range from economic externality and human capital arguments (Becker, 1994; Heyneman, 2000), to arguments of education to promote democratic civic engagement and social justice (Gutmann, 1987; Nussbaum, 2011). Regardless of how education is currently framed, discursively it is viewed as a vital element in nation-state development. Education has been argued as one of the key ingredients to national

growth, from the United States (Friedman & Mandelbaum, 2011) to the smallest of states (Bacchus, 2008; World Bank, 2012).

If education is to be assumed as a human right and a catalyst for national development – whether or not this is empirically true – policy problems include issues of access, cost, and quality. One policy solution that attempts to address all three of these concerns is *inclusive education*. While many definitions and conceptualizations of inclusive education are in play around the world, the UNESCO (1994) definition provides the broadest definition:

[S]chools should accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions. This should include disabled and gifted children, street and working children, children from remote or nomadic populations, children from linguistic, ethnic or cultural minorities and children from other disadvantaged or marginalised areas or groups. (p. 3)

While inclusive education was – and still is – a primarily rights-based policy approach, some research has argued that it is both cost-effective (Metts, 2004) and increases overall educational quality (Ainscow, Booth & Dyson, 2006).

I argue that the development of and interest in inclusive education as a policy solution in Bhutan presents a complex reality for the conception and characterization of small states as defined by the World Bank (2012). First, I explore the assumptions and definitions made of small states and how Bhutan problematizes these assumptions. Second, I detail the vast changes that have occurred to the Bhutanese education system in the past fifty years. The policies that guide these changes indicate a unique Bhutanese conceptualization of education. Third, I explain how inclusive education has been formed as a policy and highlights alternative priorities within education policy in Bhutan.

This article is focused at the level of policy discourse, which limits our understanding of what policies actually *do* and how they are *interpreted*, but as Rizvi & Lingard (2010) suggest, policies are value statements “designed to steer actions and behaviour, to guide institutions and professionals in a certain direction” (p. 8). In this paper, it is the values of educational policies that are most important in understanding Bhutan relative to small state characterization. The primary methodology used in this article is one of policy document analysis: policy documents from the Ministry of Education, 5-year plans from the Royal Government, and white-papers disseminated by governmental organizations. This was also followed by a review of scholarship on the Bhutanese education system. This resource gathering took place both outside of Bhutan, as well as within the country as part of a larger ethnographic project on Bhutanese schools. This article only presents the discursive elements of policy and scholarship written on Bhutan for an international audience (Steiner-Khamsi & Stolpe, 2010; Jules, 2008) and the reality on the ground is much more complex. This is a limitation for this study, and also a case for a richer “vertical case study” (Vavrus & Bartlett, 2009) to follow up this research.

### **Small States, Complex Realities**

The definition of a small state generally focuses primarily on population size. Bacchus (2008) identifies several definitions that place small state populations anywhere from under 1.5 million to under 5 million people. These population numbers do not seem to be based on any sort of

justified measurement. Both the World Bank (2012) and the Commonwealth Secretariat (Crossley, Bray, & Packer, 2011) use the under 1.5 million population figure as their definition, but the World Bank (2012) also notes that the term 'small states' is applied to a diversity of countries of different levels of development. Bhutan has a population estimated around 708,000 people (Government of Bhutan, 2012) which certainly places it squarely into all population definitions of a small state.

While population serves as the main criteria in defining a small state, and despite the World Bank/Commonwealth Secretariat's (2000) inclusivity of diverse economic conditions, the characterization of small states is that they are 'developing' countries with small economies (Bacchus, 2008; see also World Bank, 2000). This characterization exists despite the fact that per capita GNP among small states ranges from \$180 (Guinea-Bissau) to over \$14,000 (The Bahamas) (World Bank, 2012). Bhutan has an estimated per capita GNP of \$590 (World Bank, 2012) but, as I will argue below, this indicator is not the measurement that Bhutan uses to gauge its overall success as a country.

Despite major steps in global engagement and modernization, the Royal Government of Bhutan has been quite cautious and calculated in its external affairs (Galay, 2004). Tourists are allowed into Bhutan only through government-sanctioned tour companies and most international non-governmental organizations are not allowed to enter the country. There are also heavy restrictions on foreign investment in Bhutan (National Council of Bhutan, 2010). While Bhutan has accepted immigrant labor from Nepal and India in the past, recently the government has revised these policies (Magistad, 2011). These policies, among others, represent the larger theme in Bhutanese governance of striving to maintain itself in the twenty-first century.

Bhutan in the 21st century is filled with the paradoxes, contradictions, and complexities of an enmeshed global world. In many ways, Bhutan has embraced its 'small state' image both for itself and in the world at large. For much of its history, Bhutan has been in isolation, only getting pulled out of it from time to time by Tibetan invaders or British-India land disputes (Crossette, 1996). While Bhutan desires development and modernization, it also rigidly clings to its 'traditional culture' and perspective. The *driglam namzha* policy, for example, enforces a national cultural dress code, architectural design uniformity, and public social codes of conduct (National Library, 1999). This effort can be considered either a protection against outside cultural influences or, as Phuntsho (2004) argues, an "invention of tradition" (p. 575). There is much complexity in having a policy such as *driglam namzha*, in that it created much friction with the Nepali minority in southern Bhutan and raised questions about exactly *whose* culture was being upheld.

All focus on economic development in Bhutan is filtered through its Gross National Happiness (GNH) policies. GNH is a rejection of the standard international development indicators of economic consumption and production, such as gross national product, and instead pays deference to the nine alternative domains: "psychological wellbeing, health, education, time use, cultural diversity and resilience, good governance, community vitality, ecological diversity and resilience, and living standards" (The Centre for Bhutan Studies, 2012, GNH: Concept section, para. 1). These domains represent the holistic vision of the Royal Government to modernize Bhutan without sacrificing core Buddhist-cultural beliefs, referred to as Bhutan's "middle way" (Walcott, 2009). The ethical guidance of the GNH on policies has led to a significant limitation on un-sustainable industrial growth (Zurick, 2006).

It remains to be seen how Bhutan's 'middle way' fits into the World Bank's vision of economic development. Certainly, it can be observed that Bhutan is not embracing the traditional 'stages of

development' that are all too often taken as fact by the World Bank and others (see Sachs, 2005). I argue that Bhutan has even recently become more emboldened to challenge the meanings of 'modernity' and 'progress.' In an interview with the United Nations news agency, Prime Minister of Bhutan, Jigme Y. Thinley, advocated:

[Measuring development through GDP] is flawed and it has many deficiencies. It is flawed in that it promotes limitless growth in a world that is finite. It has deficiencies in the sense that it does not measure or account for so many things that are important to the well-being of a human individual – which ultimately is the purpose of development. ("Interview with Prime Minister of Bhutan," 2012, para. 9)

Subsistence agricultural economies – such as the case in Bhutan – are problematic to Western conceptions of what a 'developed' and 'modern' nation looks like (see Escobar, 1995) but, regardless, Bhutan is embracing a hybrid model of sustainability, tradition, and modernity. I argue that this is a far cry from the characterization of a small state as fragile and vulnerable (Mayo, 2010). Bhutan is not afraid to reject economic suggestions and aid from international agencies, as it did in 1980s when the World Bank wanted to fund a dam in southern Bhutan that would have flooded a major conservation area (Worden, 1991). This, of course, is not to say that Bhutan rejects taking international development money – far from it – but Bhutan is not simply a 'taker' of policies from international organizations, as is the frequent characterization of small states (Bacchus, 2008). One policy area where Bhutan is especially building its capacity is education, which I will turn to in the next section.

### **Education in Bhutan: From the Monastery to the Modern School**

Prior to 1959, education in Bhutan was primarily a Buddhist monastic system that taught only a select few. This monastic school system avoided the dilemma of teaching a diverse group of learners because the selection criteria for attending these schools eliminated such youth whom struggled with literacy, numeracy, and otherwise academic learning by rote. Education – primarily literacy and numeracy – was also available to aristocratic youth through the hiring of private masters that primarily came from Tibet (Phuntsho, 2000). Within Bhutan pre-1959, understanding written language was not considered an important skill to acquire and had little impact upon the everyday lives of its citizens (Dorji, 2008). It was more important to know how to grow food, make materials for living, and have good relations in one's community. These are skills that are acquired through practice and cultural transmission that do not require the institutionalization of schooling.

Beginning with modernization efforts in the 1960s, public education for the general Bhutanese population began in earnest and has risen precipitously ever since. As Phuntsho (2000) argues, "It may not be an exaggeration to claim that of all the changes and developments that the Kingdom of Bhutan saw in the last half of the twentieth century the ones in education are the most evident, momentous and far-reaching" (p. 97). The Third *Druk Gyalpo* [Dragon King], Jigme Dorji Wangchuck, initiated modernization efforts during this time believing that Bhutan needed to position itself effectively in a modern global society (Dorji, 2008). This can be viewed as a preventative measure to make sure that Bhutan became a global citizen on its own terms rather than be overcome by India or China, which were becoming emboldened during that period (Pradhan, 2012). In the *First Five-Year Plan* in 1961, education is featured prominently in

Bhutan's development agenda and the Royal Government began to sponsor public community schools (Dorji, 2003). Major changes occurred in the conceptualization of education with the introduction of 'modern' education. For instance, while monastic education emphasizes personal enlightenment and life-long reflection, modern education is seen as emphasizing the acquirement of skills to be used externally, that is, to be used after school is *completed* (Phuntsho, 2000). During its early development, the education system was almost entirely imported from India, including curricular materials and the teachers themselves (Chhoeda, 2007).

In the 1980s, the Royal Government took tangible steps away from the Indian system by localizing the curriculum, localizing the teaching force away from Indian expatriates, investing in new Bhutanese-based curricular materials, localizing school certificate examinations which were previously held in New Delhi, and embracing activity-based/inquiry-based pedagogy away from a more strict British-Indian model of lecture and memorization (Chhoeda, 2007). These educational reforms began with the New Approach to Primary Education (NAPE) in 1985 and expanded in the 1990s through support from the Asian Development Bank (Bray, 1996).

Bhutan has borrowed educational policies from India but also, increasingly, from internationalized sources. Bhutan is a signatory to major UN initiatives such as the 'Education for All' (EFA) conference in Jomtien and the 2006 Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. There is also, at present, a strong desire for an educated citizenry and democracy in direct correlation with Bhutan's commitments to initiatives such as EFA and the UN Millennium Development Goals (Ninnes, Maxwell, Rabten & Karchung, 2007). Several international organizations – such as the US-based Bhutan Foundation, JICA [Japanese International Cooperation Agency], DANIDA [Danish International Development Agency], and UN agencies such as UNICEF [United Nations International Children's Fund] and UNDP [United Nations Development Program] – have a presence in developing Bhutan's educational institutions. For example, the Bhutan Foundation and UNICEF are engaged in significant consultation on the new Special Education policy that is set to be released in 2013 (J. Dorji, personal communication, September 19, 2012).

Education is free and compulsory for Bhutanese youth from ages 6-16 and its commitment to educational equity allowed Bhutan to reach gender parity in its schools very early in its development (Ministry of Education, 2010). While it is invested in meeting the commitments proposed in UN human rights initiatives, Bhutan is also committed to modernize and develop in its own unique way. Beginning in the 1990s, the concept of GNH became central to Bhutan's education strategy, as the government commits to "maximize the happiness of all Bhutanese and to enable them to achieve their full and innate potential as human beings" (Royal Government of Bhutan, 1999, p. 12). Denman and Namgyel (2008) argue that the Bhutanese system eschews standardization, privatization, and competition. All educational policies must receive the approval of the Gross National Happiness Commission before they are allowed to be enacted.

Making modern education curriculum better fit the culture and values of Bhutan provided an education system that was more relevant and more acceptable to the everyday lives of the Bhutanese citizenry. Chhoeda (2007) suggests that localization and community participation in Bhutanese curriculum "provided flexibility for Bhutanese educators to introduce new Bhutanese content and value systems in the education program" (p. 58). While, as cited earlier, the educational system in Bhutan faces many similar challenges to other educational systems around the world (Ministry of Education, 2004), the outcomes expected for students at the end of primary school reflect a balance between the academic expectations of a 'modern' country with a uniquely Bhutanese cultural twist. Namgyel (2011, p. 62) suggests that the 1980s became a period

of 'Bhutanization' of its education system. During this time, subjects like environmental studies became core aspects of the curriculum and the Royal Government of Bhutan debated the negative aspects of 'Western education.' Today, among other curricular goals, the Bhutanese education system promotes the following (as cited in Chhoeda, 2007, p. 60):

- A deep sense of respect and pride in being Bhutanese, and in being citizens who are loyal, dedicated, productive, contented, and happy with a high standard of moral ethics and discipline
- A greater understanding and appreciation for the predominantly agriculturally-based rural lifestyle and a developed sense of resourcefulness and dignity of labor

These goals, in particular, highlight an education system not merely focused on the acquisition of skills that benefit the Bhutanese economy. Bhutan has seemingly managed to integrate the academic demands of a modern education with the socio-cultural traditions of its citizenry, although there are still tensions between the traditional monastic educational system and the modern educational system (Denman & Namgyel, 2008; Phuntsho, 2000).

### **Inclusive Education Policy in Bhutan**

One of the primary challenges for a modern education system is contending with human difference. Whereas the monastic educational system in Bhutan had only to pick those youth who naturally inclined towards literary activities and spiritual practice – while the majority of the population engaged in agricultural activities without the need for literacy – the modern educational system brings heterogenous community youth together in one classroom with one teacher with the expected outcome that they all learn together. Dorji (2008) argues that “for the [Bhutanese] teacher...the secular system was more difficult as he or she had to deal with a number of pupils with varied learning abilities and problems” (p. 22). As has been the case in the development of other educational systems, committing to compulsory education for *all* summons the dilemma of how to educate youth with differing abilities effectively and efficiently with limited resources (Schuelka & Johnstone, 2012). Bhutan has begun to address these concerns through its increasing attention towards special education and inclusive education.

Within the past ten years, the Royal Government of Bhutan and the Ministry of Education have become more interested in how to best educate youth with disabilities in schools. In the *Ninth Five-Year Plan* (Royal Government of Bhutan, 2002), a Special Education Unit was established within the Ministry of Education to specifically address the needs of both staff and students involved in the education of youth with disabilities. The Royal Government (2002) estimates that 3.5% of Bhutanese youth have a disability, however the criteria for determining a disability diagnosis remain unclear. While the exact number of youth with disabilities participating in education is unknown historically, it has become a top priority for the Royal Government (2002; 2009) and the Ministry of Education (2004; 2010). The Royal Government (2009) has claimed that 10-12% of children do not attend school because either they have a disability or live in extremely remote areas of Bhutan. Partly, the priority of getting all school-age children into school is an internal motivation, but Bhutan's engagement with international initiatives such as EFA and its commitments to various UN conventions can also be conscious or unconscious motivators.

The Bhutanese Department of Education, within the Ministry of Health and Education (2003), spells out its vision on education for students with disabilities in *Education Sector Strategy: Realizing Vision 2020*. Their vision is as follows:

All children with disabilities and with special needs – including those with physical, mental and other types of impairment – will be able to access and benefit from education. This will include full access to the curriculum, participation in extra-curricular activities and access to cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activities ... Children with disabilities and those with special needs will, to the greatest extent possible, be able to attend a local school where they will receive quality education alongside their non-disabled peers. (p. 36)

Inclusive education continues to resonate within Bhutanese policy documents such as the Royal Government's *Tenth Five-Year Plan* (2009) and the policies of the Ministry of Education (2010).

While there are still large gaps between idealized inclusive policies and the material, curricular, and personnel capacity to commit them to praxis, Dorji (2003) suggests that Bhutanese culture is already comprised of the values necessary for an inclusive approach to education. Both Dorji (2003) and Namgyel (2011) label this as “wholesome education.” At least going back to 2001, the *Kuensel* national newspaper has been covering issues and challenges related to persons with disabilities in Bhutan. Editorials (see *The government needs to do more*, 2009) call for the increased capacity of schools to properly educate youth with disabilities. The priorities of the Royal Government concerning equity in education, along with the media's portrayal of the policy problem of educational and societal exclusion of persons with disabilities, present inclusive education as a natural policy solution.

The institutionalization of inclusive education policy into the educational structure of Bhutan represents a concerted effort in building an inclusive Bhutanese society. This is a far cry from the GDP-related educational priorities of the World Bank (2012). As alluded to by both Dorji (2003) and Namgyel (2011), as well as Lokamitra (2004), education in Bhutan is deeply connected to its Buddhist culture and is expressed in both conscious and unconscious ways. The belief in the inter-connectedness of all beings naturally lends itself to forming and expressing policies that support inclusiveness. While the belief in karma can be problematic in the conceptualization of disabilities (Schuelka, 2012), Bhutanese GNH-influenced policies are supportive of persons with disabilities through a Buddhist lens. I think it goes without saying that the World Bank does not view the world through a Buddhist perspective, nor do I think it will embrace Buddhist development practices anytime soon.

### **Conclusion: Building Inclusive Education Policy in Small States**

As shown above, Bhutan is empowered to enact educational policies that envision a better society – not just in Bhutan but for the world at-large (“Interview with Prime Minister of Bhutan,” 2012). While the World Bank (2000; 2012) is primarily concerned with small state economic development and issues of markets and incomes, Bhutan is choosing its own path. Galay (2004) writes, “[T]here can be no universal theory which can explain the behavior of small states with different culture, politics, domestic institutions and perceptions of security” (p. 106). It would be most appropriate, given the case of Bhutan, to identify that small states may not be prioritizing capitalistic economic growth as the *prima facie* of ‘development’; that, perhaps, there are other dimensions to education and society that can be prioritized. Crossley, Bray, and Packer (2011) make the argument that small states have been engaging in making their education systems more inclusive and expansive. Many states lack the infrastructure and capacity to fully realize these goals, and resort to focusing on an educational system that is designed to foster economic skills for economic development – leaving education for marginalized youth populations in the hands of NGOs, special schools,

or not at all (Schuelka & Johnstone, 2012). Given that the entire education system in Bhutan is only fifty years old, Bhutan has made significant progress in shaping a comprehensive public education system that is unique and not solely based upon adopting out-of-context pre-packaged international education policies.

An alternative reading of Bhutanese education policy in regards to inclusive education could be that the presence of these progressive and international-friendly policies are just another form of 'global speak' in which the words are mere representations of what donors and international policy experts want to hear. In defining "global speak," Steiner-Khamsi and Stolpe (2006) suggest, "[t]here is always and everywhere a huge gap between policy talk and policy action" (p. 185). While this may certainly be the case in Bhutan – given education policy is often analyzed by international audiences and not by those tasked with carrying it out locally (Jules, 2008; Steiner-Khamsi & Stolpe, 2006) – the entirety of its development philosophy cannot be overlooked. Of course there will always be gaps and 'loose coupling' between any policy and its practice, and I argue that persistently pointing this out is no longer helpful research.

Steiner-Khamsi (2010) describes the ability of policy-makers to address international donors in one 'language' and then to address local constituencies in another as "policy bilingualism." Jules (2008) takes this analysis one step further and suggests regional policy language as another aspect of "policy trilingualism." These descriptions do not entirely work in Bhutan as there is little reliance on external donation, but there may be some analogy to Bhutan gaining international political capital by being for its alternative development strategy. Regionally, Bhutan is quite unique and set apart from its neighbors in SAARC [South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation] in its history, politics, education strategy, and its development philosophy. In the case of the new Special Education Policy in Bhutan that is to be released in 2013, the policy has not only been reviewed by international experts but also is reviewed internally by Gross National Happiness experts. While UNICEF is involved in inclusive education and child-friendly schools in Bhutan, they are not dangling money in front of the Ministry of Education and incentivizing the policy to become 'multilingual,' nor is there any form of international aid bribery that has been so criticized in the past in other regions. In my opinion, the presence of such policies in Bhutan are a natural off-shoot of its desire for national development balanced with a focus on inclusive societies and a commitment to the spiritual, material, and psychological well-being of its citizens.

It is an over-simplification to say that Bhutan is *not interested at all* in its economic growth because, indeed, it is quite concerned with its economy. However, the Royal Government is equally concerned with the well-being of its people and through its GNH policies, the well-being and happiness of Bhutanese citizens becomes the primary overall concern. The Bhutanese are very proud that they are considered an outlier of development and economically-biased policies, as evidenced by the recent interview at the United Nations by Bhutanese Prime Minister Jigmi Y. Thinley in which he said:

Bhutan has never really sought fame or popularity. And in fact, GNH is something that we did not seek to promote, but the knowledge that people do know about GNH and associate this idea with Bhutan gives me a sense of hope in the future of mankind. It means that people are aware that there is such a thing as an alternative way living life, an alternative way to living life in such a way that life as we live it can be meaningful and can become sustainable. ("Interview with Prime Minister of Bhutan," 2012)



A focus on economic capacity development in small states misses the fuller picture of society and culture within those small states. While it is true that inclusive education is expensive and uses more resources (Metts, 2004), there are many intangible rewards and creative solutions to limited resources in education (Schuelka & Johnstone, 2012). Bhutan, like many small states, recognizes that education is not solely an economic enterprise.

How Bhutan challenges the World Bank (2000, 2012) 'small state' status is that it is not looking for development by Western definitions of the term. Bhutan is crafting its own 'modernity' and hardly fits neatly into either World Bank conceptualizations or expectations for small states. The World Bank (2000) calls for small states to be exposed to global markets, have large export markets, feature diversified economies, and access to capital (see also World Bank, 2000). To Bhutan, these things are unacceptable either because they are unsustainable, un-Buddhist, or unrealistic to the realities of its geography and position. To the Royal Government of Bhutan (2011), GNH is a much more sustainable and locally-relevant philosophy of development and one of the primary ways in which this is expressed is through its education priorities.

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