

Let's Focus on the Gaps: Educational Disparities and Youth Potential in Bhutan

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"...is the education our youth are receiving attuned to needs of the nation? And once educated, will our children find employment and realise their full potential?"

- His Majesty the King of Bhutan (National Day, 2011)

The Facts

It is a well-established fact that education is one of the most powerful tools in preparing our youth for the future. Education, guided by the right policies, creates opportunities for all to succeed, leading to increased wellbeing and equity in society. However, what is missing in the current discussions about preparing youth for the future in Bhutan is the importance of equity in educational opportunities in the country.

As in many developing countries, educational inequity is a barrier to youth empowerment and development in Bhutan. Wide gaps in educational outcomes suggest that, unless Bhutan focuses on equity in tandem with quality, the future may be bright for only a fraction of our youth. A majority of the youth are at a disadvantage that greatly reduces their opportunities for a bright future right from the start because of their background.

Socio-economic status should not determine life outcomes for youth. Yet in Bhutan it does. Poverty imposes conditions that constrain their potential for success and development in life. Evidence shows that a child born into poverty faces multiple disadvantages that negatively impact his or her chances of succeeding in school. For example, the likelihood of a child walking a longer distance to school, being enrolled in a class with fewer resources, receiving less home support for learning, and doing more household chores is higher for children from poorer backgrounds. These children are also more likely to live in a household in which the head has little or no education.¹

¹*Child Poverty in Bhutan: Insights from Multidimensional Child Poverty Index and Qualitative Interviews with Poor Children.* NSB, 2016.

Such an environment further compounds poverty since children from such households have a higher chance of dropping out of school early.² These households also have limited access to basic infrastructure such as electricity, improved sanitation and water, gas and electricity for cooking which further narrows their children’s opportunities (Figure 1).³

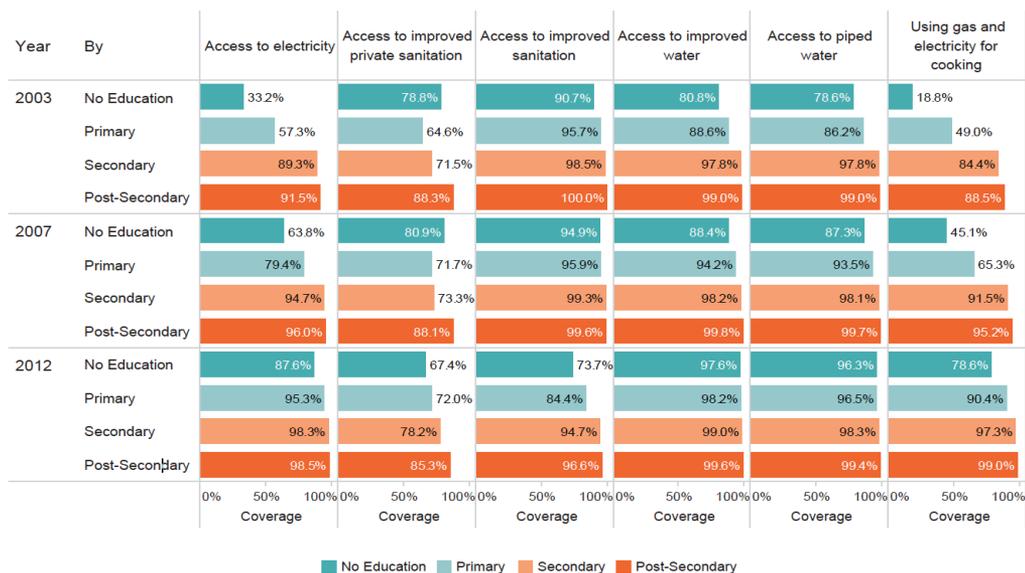


Figure 1: Access to Basic Infrastructure, by Education of Household Head
 Source: Figure 4.7. (Bhutan Poverty Assessment Report 2014, NSB)

Consequently, a child born in the bottom quintile of wealth distribution is more likely to drop out of school earlier than a child born into a higher quintile. At the primary level, there is a seven percent gap in attendance rates between children from the poorest (90.8 percent) and richest quintiles (97.9 percent). The completion rate shows an even bigger difference of 32 percent with only 55 percent of children from the poorest quintile completing primary school compared with 87.9 percent of children in the wealthiest quintile. The disparity is greater at the secondary level where the attendance rate for children from the poorest quintile (82.5 percent) is 11 percent less than children from the richest one (93.6 percent). Only 19.2 percent of poorest quintile children complete secondary school compared with 69.3 percent of the wealthiest children, a 50 percent gap in completion rates.⁴

Similar wide variances exist at the district level where higher rates of poverty presage higher rates of school dropouts and repeaters.⁵ Poverty is highest in rural areas where

²BMIS Education, UNICEF 2010.

³Bhutan Poverty Assessment Report 2014, NSB.

⁴Figure 4.3. Bhutan Poverty Assessment Report 2014, NSB.

⁵A Situation Analysis of Children, Youth and Women in Bhutan. UNICEF, 2012

approximately 98 percent of the poor reside.⁶ It is, therefore, not surprising that children in urban areas perform at a higher level than children from rural areas.⁷ So pressing is poverty among poor children that they often cannot afford even the nominal fees and expenses for public education. Inability to meet school expenses was identified as the leading reason for dropping out amongst poor children deprived of education.⁸

The youngest and poorest children are also at greater risk of becoming disabled and less likely to engage in early learning, placing them at a developmental disadvantage right from the start.⁹ This is a serious matter because missed opportunities for early intervention are directly linked to reduced learning and poorer developmental outcomes with repercussions that can last a lifetime. Bhutan's rising youth unemployment is one of the more conspicuous consequences of these disparities, reaching an all-time high of 10.7 percent in 2015.¹⁰ Furthermore, female youth unemployment stood at 12.5 percent in 2015 compared with 8.2 percent for males, suggesting a glaring gender gap in employment opportunities.

This is a worrying trend since unemployment is closely correlated with increased crime rates as well as added social and economic costs to society. Research on youth and crime in Bhutan confirms this relationship. The National Statistical Bureau (NSB) found that unemployed youth crime ranked the highest among total crimes committed in Thimphu.¹¹ Closer analysis of Thimphu city's crime records show that incarcerated youth with little or no education committed the highest number of crimes (Figure 2). It is abundantly clear from these findings that we cannot address unemployment without also addressing education.

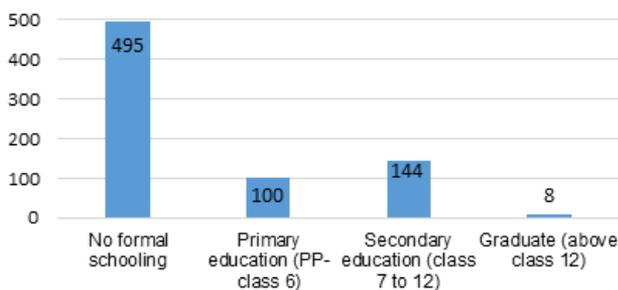


Figure 2: Number of Offences by Level of Education of Youth Offender
(Records for Thimphu Thromde from Jan. 2008 to Aug. 2011). Source: Figure 2.13 (NSB 2015)

⁶Ibid

⁷*Bhutan Education Blueprint 2021-2024*, Ministry of Education 2014.

⁸*Child Poverty in Bhutan: Insights from Multidimensional Child Poverty Index and Qualitative Interviews with Poor Children*. NSB, 2016.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰*Labour Force Survey Report 2015*. Ministry of Labour and Human Resources, Bhutan.

¹¹*Crime and Mental Health Issues Among the Young Bhutanese People*. National Statistics Bureau, 2015.

The same study also found that poverty, unemployment and lack of education were among the top five reasons that young people commit crime. These are also symptoms of a society deeply entrenched in inequality—and inequality is an impediment to development.

The Mandate

The evidence presented above reveals only a snapshot of some of the consequences of educational inequity in Bhutan but it is enough to demand action for closer analysis of educational inequities in the country. If Bhutan is serious about its commitment to Gross National Happiness (GNH), it must address its existing educational inequities. GNH is a vision profoundly embedded in a concept of equity and Bhutan cannot progress as a GNH society if the education system only favors a fraction of the population. This could lead to the creation of a divisive society—divisive not just in economic terms but also in outlook, abilities, social and political participation, and potential for growth. The cost of inequity is high for economic, social and moral reasons. It is a cost that Bhutan cannot afford while it is on its path to progress and democracy.

Fortunately for Bhutan, the commitment to improve education has always been a priority on the government agenda. The right of every child to education is enshrined in the Constitution which mandates that: “The State shall endeavour to provide education for the purpose of improving and increasing knowledge, values, and skills of the entire population with education being directed towards the full development of the human personality” (Article 9.15).

It is time to act on the Constitution and acknowledge that educational reform must take a two-pronged approach that focuses on quality as well as equity across all dimensions of education. This means that, in our efforts to provide equal educational opportunities for all, we need to focus more on providing additional support to children who are at risk of exclusion or disadvantage due to their background. It also means moving beyond a utilitarian purpose and emphasising a social and moral objective for education in Bhutan.

While it is difficult to change the circumstances children come from, the least the government can do is ensure that once a child is in school, his or her background only becomes a factor that determines the type of support he or she should receive, and not their learning outcomes and life prospects. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the government to ensure that every child has an equal opportunity to succeed through education.

The Possibilities

There are several ways that strategies for correcting educational inequality could be set in motion and strengthened. First, given that educational inequity starts early in life, even before schooling starts, interventions that improve early childhood opportunities for all children, especially disadvantaged ones, are amongst the surest ways of reducing social inequality. Studies show that high quality multi-sectoral early childhood interventions produce benefits in human, social and economic terms contributing to sustainable growth and social equity. This is one of the most effective ways of breaking the cycle of poverty and increasing social mobility.

Second, in recent months, curriculum reform has taken centre stage in Bhutan's education reform approach. Given the gap in learning achievements between rural and urban children as well as between boys and girls, this is a much needed development for both quality and equity outcomes. The curriculum reform process must consciously aim to reduce the existing learning gaps to achieve optimal learning results for all children regardless of gender, socio-economic background or ability. Curriculum is also related to knowledge, skills and aptitude development in children, which has direct implications for employment opportunities. Curriculum reform should, therefore, incorporate knowledge, skills and aptitudes that prepare children for future employment as well as larger social and political roles in society.

Third, assessment is an integral component of curriculum reform. It is time to review the purpose of assessment and examinations in our education system. The sole purpose of assessment should be to evaluate learning and not to screen children for admission to higher levels of education. The current assessment model acts as a screening tool that promotes children who do well and relegates children who are struggling. This is exemplified most clearly in the cut-off points that the government sets for high school due to limited seats in public schools. As a result, the likelihood of a struggling student who is most probably from a disadvantaged background progressing to higher education levels is greatly reduced. Unless they can afford private education, this struggling student will most likely drop out of the education system due to factors pre-determined by his or her background.

The assessment methods children are exposed to also have a strong bearing on how they perceive learning. To establish a truly nurturing culture that promotes lifelong learning, assessment should encourage reflection and persistence, not consequences. A high-stake assessment system is not only detrimental to the learning process,

it also undermines the realisation of GNH for society because high-stake exams compromise student wellbeing and happiness.

Fourth, it is critical that curriculum reforms are matched by a commitment to improve the learning conditions for children in schools. This includes, but is not limited to, better facilities in terms of infrastructure and services, access to resources, and effective and inclusive support for at-risk children. The current move to establish central schools in the country could ensure improved learning conditions for children. However, such reforms must consider the implications within the context of equity and quality.

At the recent 18th National Council session, members of the Special Committee of the National Council expressed concern over the sustainability and quality of central schools. This is a reasonable concern because even the smallest educational reforms put the development and lives of children at stake and must be rooted in evidence and research. Current issues such as inadequate financial, human and material resources in some existing central schools suggest a general gap in implementation and could be mitigated through more evidence-based planning. To fully realise the impact of central schools and other education reforms, the government must invest in evidence-based research that places the needs of children and teachers at the heart of the development process.

Fifth, teachers are the main drivers of education. The countries with the most successful educational achievements like Singapore and Finland have the highest standards of teacher recruitment to attract the best and most highly motivated candidates. It is time Bhutan treated teacher recruitment, preparation and retention as a critical priority requiring the highest standards. Teaching is a profession that influences social transformation and should not be treated simply as a means to employment. Unfortunately, high attrition rates suggest that teaching is not regarded as a profession of choice but rather a last job resort.¹²

The *Bhutan Education Blueprint 2014-2024* report outlines five key steps, ranging from recruitment strategies to professional development options and improved conditions, that could potentially elevate the status of teaching to a highly coveted profession. There is an urgent need to evaluate and apply these initiatives because teacher-related concerns are as important as student-related issues in the discussion of education equity and quality.

¹²*Bhutan Education Blueprint 2014-2024*, Ministry of Education 2014.

These suggestions represent a fragment of the interventions that could enhance youth potential through the education system in Bhutan. To fully realise the magnitude of educational impact on society, efforts to address education quality and equity must be reinforced through a legal educational framework such as an Education Act. The absence of a separate legal provision for education or a national education policy, even after 50 years of State-supported education, signifies a major gap in vision, planning, implementation and accountability. To chart a clear path for education, Bhutan must institute an Education Act that promotes quality and equity in all aspects of life for every individual.

The path to quality and equity in education is beset with challenges but it also offers immense possibilities for progress and development. The youth of Bhutan are often referred to as the future leaders—a beacon of hope for the nation. Time and again, His Majesty the King has emphasised that the future we envision for Bhutan is achievable only through investment in our youth and the kind of educational opportunities we make available to them. We must be intentional in how we educate our future leaders and in how we address existing inequities during this process. We owe it to all our youth, especially those who are at risk of exclusion and disadvantage. We must believe that every child in Bhutan, given the right conditions, has the potential for a bright future.