

Bhutan Civics Education: Insights and Perspectives of Stakeholders

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Background

With the introduction of parliamentary democracy in 2008, the Ministry of Education introduced new Civics textbooks for students of Classes 7 to 12 in the 2008 academic year. Civics study is mandatory for all students until Class 10, and those in the Arts stream of Classes 11 and 12, as part of their History subject. The new Civics textbooks were developed in 2006, based on the draft Constitution, the Election Bill of the Kingdom of Bhutan, and the Local Government Bill of Bhutan.

The aim of the new Civics textbooks was to educate youth on the parliamentary government system and on the understanding of civics and citizenship that would be vital for the new political landscape. It was based on the national plan (Planning Commission, 1999) that envisaged an education system to:

- promote the nation's unique cultural heritage and ethical values;
- develop the capacity of young people with universal values;
- groom their young minds to become knowledgeable, skillful, creative, enterprising, mindful, reflective, and confident; and
- equip the young to respond to emerging national and global challenges.

The Ministry of Education hoped to achieve its vision of an educated and enlightened society of Gross National Happiness, built on and sustained by the unique Bhutanese values of *tha damtshig* and *le judre*.

Purpose and Intent of the Study

This paper has several objectives:

- examine students' and teachers' perceptions and experiences of civics and citizenship education;

- investigate stakeholders' expectations about civics and citizenship education in schools;
- explore perceptions of the ways in which universal democratic values, GNH values and Bhutanese ethos can be imparted through civics and citizenship courses;
- gather opinions on whether students get more civics and citizenship knowledge from schools through textbooks, or from outside sources such as home, community and media;
- consider other pertinent and emerging issues relating to civics and citizenship education.

Rationale

In 2013, the first cohort of students completed a six-year cycle of the new Civics curriculum, i.e., from the 2008 academic Year in Class 7 to the 2013 academic year in Class 12.

Therefore, it was timely to assess the students' learning experiences and stakeholder perceptions to highlight any gaps and deficiencies, with the new Civics textbooks, in the light of concurrent socio-political changes in the country that have direct consequences on the contents of the curriculum.

Perspectives of relevant stakeholders -- students, teachers, civics textbook writers, and curriculum officials -- were gathered through semi-structured interviews. Constitutional post holders and parliamentarians were also interviewed, as the Civics textbooks have extensive content on their offices.

Insights, Perceptions, and Findings

Civics and/or Citizenship

The current Bhutan Civics curriculum is a study of civics, including elements of citizenship education. Many teachers say that they have provided their own definition of civics during the lessons. As a result, students had limited understanding of civics education, other than the establishment of institutions and their structures. A majority of students interviewed had thought of civics and citizenship education as a study of just government structure, politics, and public institutions. Aspects of

citizenship education were largely missing from the textbooks. Therefore, it is important to first understand the subtle difference between the terms “Civics” and “Citizenship”.

According to Mellor (2003), Civics and Citizenship are not the same. Civics relates to civic knowledge and Citizenship is a disposition.

The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (2012) defines Civics as an identifiable body of knowledge, skills and understanding relating to the organisation and working of society. On the other hand, Citizenship is the condition of belonging to social, religious, political or community groups, locally, nationally and globally. Being part of the group carries a sense of belonging or identity, which includes rights with responsibilities and duties with privileges. These are guided by agreed values and mutual obligations required for active participation in the group.

Civics Perceived as Low Priority Subject

Civics education is one of four sub-parts of History, which comprises Bhutan Civics, Bhutan History, Indian History, and World History. However, these four components are not allocated equal weighting in the examination. Bhutan Civics is accorded only 15%-20% of marks in the annual examination.

Weekly lesson periods have to be shared among as many as 8 to 12 different subjects for Classes 7 to 10. History gets a share of three periods in a week, which have to be further divided among its four sub-sections, resulting in less than one period a week for Bhutan Civics.

With inadequate time available, teachers mainly follow a lecture method of teaching, with the overriding objective to cover the syllabus before the examinations. This deprives students of the activity-based teaching-learning strategy, as required by the Teachers' Guide.

Against this backdrop, the teaching-learning approach is predominantly examination-oriented and summative. Students are bound to devote more attention to subjects with higher examination weighting, again resulting in less time for Bhutan Civics. With such systemic sidelining of the subject, students mistakenly believe that civics is not an important subject.

Lacunae in the Present Civics Curriculum

Civics textbooks were assessed to have more content on the Civics component and much less on Citizenship. Aspects of citizenship education were missing. There was also no avenue for students to exercise their reasoning potential, which is an important aspect of citizenship education. Many stakeholders said that Civics textbooks lacked the skills and disposition aspects of learning. Content on values was limited to just the fundamental rights and duties, with even scantier content on democracy and its principles and fundamentals.

Before 2006, civics and citizenship were defined as education designed to produce good citizens who are well-informed and have a positive disposition to be actively engaged in the community. Teachers and students shared diverse understanding of the subject.

One student opined that Civics is a study about our own country, people and culture. Another student said that Civics is a study of civilisations or settlements, about change, development and current affairs of the country, which citizens have to learn and adapt to.

One teacher felt that Civics should not include Bhutanese ethos such as *tha damtshig*, *le judre* and *driglam namzhag*. Some teachers said that these should be incorporated into the main History subject, not in the Civics textbooks. Yet other teachers said that the study of Civics is all about discipline or *driglam namzhag*. Some students concluded that the study of Civics is relevant for only those who intended to join politics and become politicians.

A majority of students suggested that civics and citizenship education was only a study of government structure, politics, and public institutions. Teachers also observed that students generally viewed democracy as addressing freedom of individuals, and the responsibilities of citizens are often forgotten or not understood properly.

In fact, Dasho Sonam Kinga once stated that democracy has been perceived and articulated in the form of demand and respect for resource allocation (UNDP, 2012). This suggests that the students' misconceptions are held broadly across the population.

Generally, democracy is equated only with elections, but students ought to be learning about the roles and responsibilities of different institutions in the democratic set-up. Civics curricula, through the textbooks, should enable students to learn that every stakeholder has a role to play in a democracy. Sustaining and strengthening democracy must not be left to the Election Commission of Bhutan and Parliamentarians.

Students who showed interest in Civics were actually those who aspired to join politics. Others displayed the misunderstanding that one does not need to study Civics if one intends to join an office with a typical 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. work schedule. On the contrary, students should understand that for any job, be it civil servants or politicians, civics and citizenship education is essential. But this misunderstanding is created by the textbooks.

Civics and citizenship education broadly covers three components: knowledge, skills and values, which are inextricably intertwined. Even if most teachers indicated their understanding that these three basic elements were all components of the education they needed to deliver, students did not appear to have the same understanding.

This suggests the importance of addressing the students' lack of clarity in the basic objectives of learning civics. The rationale for civics is not clearly articulated in the curriculum. Thus there is a need to strengthen the "why" aspect of civics and citizenship education.

Dasho Karma Ura (2009) reminds us that the education system in Bhutan should pay attention to values central to our cultural perspective. An educator should be completely involved in the ethical development of students. Values education is an over-riding need of the society and it should be the schools' priority (Griffith, 1984).

According to Dasho Karma Ura, the information in the Social Studies textbooks emphasises details of high post holders, such as Dzongda (District Administrators), Drangpoens (judges), ministers, and parliamentarians with their ceremonial attire like kabneys (scarves). Discussions on values remain poor and underdeveloped.

The textbooks also contain little information on the participation aspects of democracy. Literature reviews suggest that there are two skills needed

to help students internalise knowledge learnt -- general skills and participatory skills (Dogany, 2012). While traces of general skills are seen in the textbooks, very few participatory skills can be seen in both the textbooks and the Teachers' Guide.

On a positive note, textbooks focusing on government structures, institutions, and systems are still relevant, since a citizen has direct connection with the government. Both teachers and students should appreciate the benefits associated with knowing government structures and the systems underlying such institutions. Without this knowledge, there is a risk of developing cynicism and a disjunction between citizens and the people engaged in the management of government institutions.

Guilfoile & Delander (2014) suggest that students get a deeper understanding from:

- examining the unique relationship between history, government, law and democracy, and how they work together and support one another;
- understanding the rationale behind the system of government we have;
- what sacrifices our forefathers had made to secure that system;
- what democracy truly means; and
- the crucial role that every citizen plays in sustaining it.

There is an apparent gap between the ground reality, the textbooks' contents and the teaching-learning activities required in the curriculum documents, and the ideal situation suggested by different literatures on the subject.

This results in students failing to appreciate the relevance of the subject in their lives despite its importance. Teachers also need to connect the content with the lives of students through their lessons. This would require an updated Teachers' Guide, so that the teaching-learning activities are able to draw relevance of the classroom activities to the real-life situations. The guide should offer suggestions, which address best practice in teaching and learning.

Civics lessons should not be confined to classroom learning about government structure and institutions, but should extend to real life scenarios outside the school boundaries. One stakeholder shared her concern that

students' responsibilities as citizens are missing in the textbooks, and civics education is narrowly taken as study of government structure. Rather, civics learning should enable students to understand their roles in the society. This would merit a relook at the civics curriculum altogether, right from the title of textbooks to development of chapters and topics.

The curriculum should broaden the scope of study and encompass all three areas of knowledge, skills, and values. Further, skills should include both general and participatory skills, and values should include attitudes and dispositions. All literature reviews, be they western or eastern or even within the diverse Asian cultures, suggest that civics and citizenship cannot be separated.

In the Bhutanese parlance, civics education should include GNH aspects. Only with citizenship concerns incorporated in the curriculum can the nation produce better citizens. Having the citizenship component along with civics components will encourage students to know how individuals can contribute to nation building.

The foreword in the Civics textbooks reads: "Civics should inspire an appreciation of the need to develop the necessary qualities of head and heart that help young men and women to live as good fellow citizens in a democratic society, that is based on the principle of mutual respect and trust". All these suggest the intent of the Ministry of Education to include citizenship components in the textbooks and curriculum. To sum up, the content of textbooks is central and crucial in influencing both the role of teachers and students in value education.

Inadequate Professional Development Opportunities for Teachers

As the contents are mostly on procedural matters, it indicated that teachers themselves are not familiar with the details of working procedures in different institutions. For many teachers, this subject was not part of their initial training and they have received no in-service training to update their content knowledge. As a consequence, teachers might omit certain materials during the teaching or simply "stick to the text".

Therefore, there is a need to upgrade the competencies of teachers. They need regular professional development opportunities and field visits to acquaint themselves with recent developments in the country.

His Majesty the King clearly identified the need for ongoing teacher education in His statement: "...You cannot tell children to be strong if you are not strong yourself. If you don't know anything about the subject that you are teaching how much of it are you going to give to your students? You cannot give what you do not have...".

The Ministry of Education is responsible for enhancing the capacity of teachers, but other agencies can also contribute towards developing competent teachers in schools. It will be more efficient and effective if different agencies conduct refresher courses on new developments emanating from their respective organisations.

For instance, the Parliament could initiate programmes to disseminate new legislations to teachers and students. Likewise, the Judiciary could disseminate new judicial developments and landmark decisions. Be it new legislation, policies or policy implementation, plans and programmes, it would be very effective not just in the quality of dissemination but would help share the burden of Ministry of Education, if the respective agencies could contribute with their specialised skills and allocated resources. Therefore, it should be the responsibility of the State as a whole to support the ongoing development of Civics teachers.

Under-utilisation of Students' Learning and Knowledge Absorptive Capacity

Some students shared knowledge, skills, and values they learned as hands-on participants in democracy clubs in their schools. They were excited to be club members and had stories to share about their democracy clubs. Many students wished that they were taught in classrooms in a similar way as in democracy club sessions. Democracy clubs appeared to have only limited membership, suggesting that this benefit was restricted to the number of students that the club could take in.

Conclusion

As revealed through the interviews, teachers found it difficult to teach civics, while students found it difficult to learn civics. There was a chain-effect from teachers to students.

Students indicated they found topics in the civics textbooks filled with terminologies difficult for them to understand. Students wanted to see live events, through visits to Parliament, Local Government, etc., so that they could understand the meanings of certain terminologies in the proper context and perspective.

Additionally, students appreciated the role of media, which gave them opportunities to learn about current events, and how and what they were learning in class was enacted in reality. Students admitted that they actually learned more from outside sources than from the classroom lessons. This suggests that the students actually have potential to learn more about civics and citizenship, so long as there is a comprehensive curriculum supported by appropriate education strategies and pedagogies.

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