

Politics and Education Policy

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Broadly speaking, education, in itself, is a path towards a progressive human life. The Buddha viewed education as a path to human enlightenment, or liberation from repeated suffering.

Thomas Jefferson, one of America's eminent presidents, stated that education is central to creating an "enlightened citizenry... for the proper functioning of a republic." This implies that well-educated citizens are a prerequisite to smooth governance of the country. This is why Jefferson argued that it is important for the country to provide "a suitable education for all citizens."¹ This is also true for Bhutan. In contrast, the concept of politics refers to the governance of citizens, the relationship between the ruler and the ruled, and the way scarce resources are utilised.² Under the broad umbrella of politics, education becomes inseparable from government. Political scientists and educationists argue that "there is no apolitical educational system"³ and the two influence each other.

Education and Politics: a Symbiotic Relationship

A government's political will strongly affects education because the government of the day makes decisions on budget allocation, human resource distribution and capacity building, and the improvement of the educational infrastructure. The government can also influence the appointment of the heads of the educational institutions and schools, with some, perhaps, selected based on political or party interests and not based on professional credentials. Moreover, politics can be expressed in "authoritative values".⁴ Therefore, politics can either advance or retard education.

In Bhutan's context, school education has been given high priority since the modern education system was established in the 1960s.⁵ For a small country with limited military and economic resources, the human resource is the nation's most valuable asset and is essential for the nation's progress. However, education is viewed today as a gateway to the labour force where

¹Smith (1997: 1), retrieved from <https://www.printfriendly.com/p/g/BjTHxe>, "Thomas Jefferson on Politics & Government", retrieved from <https://famguradian.org/subjects/politics/thomasjefferson/jeff1350.htm>

²Ijov and Sar (2015:15).

³(Cited in Ijov and Sar 2015: 18).

⁴Ijov and Sar (2015:15).

⁵Ministry of Education (2014:16).

employability appears to take precedence over the value of education and a preparation of the citizens for life. Since the advent of democracy in the country, education has been given prominence on the political agenda of successive elected governments. The change in governments has affected education policy, school curriculum, teacher preparedness and infrastructure support and as a result, has had an impact on the attitude and aptitude building of our future citizens.

Politics Fashions Education

During the Druk Phuensum Tshogpa's (DPT) tenure (2008 - 2013), education policy led to the Education City Act (2012). The Act promulgated the establishment of high quality institutions to raise the standard of education and to create knowledge centres through public-private partnerships (PPP), joint ventures, or full private participation in the Education City.⁶ An area was identified and some basic infrastructure like a road, a bridge, and electricity supply lines were built. However, the project did not take off and the concept of the Education City, apparently not adequately researched, was mired in allegations of corruption and incomplete planning.

The DPT also convened an international “Educating for Gross National Happiness” conference in 2009, attended by renowned educationists, thinkers, and academics. Following this, the government introduced the Educating for Gross National Happiness initiative in 2010. There was a flurry of activity in schools across the country around the theme of “Green School for Green Bhutan”. It planned to build physical, social, cultural and intellectual greenery in young minds following GNH values.⁷ There was an attempt to incorporate GNH as a core criteria in the assessment of school performance but it is not clear what impact this initiative had on the education system. We have not seen a specific curriculum for an “enlightened GNH society”.

When the People's Democratic Party (PDP) formed the government (2013 - 2018), it made revisions to the education policy and introduced some reforms. The brainchild of the previous government, the Education City, was abandoned and in its place the central school system was introduced. Although the objective was to build a network of central schools to

⁶Bhutan Education City Act (2012:17).

⁷Powdye (2014: 119-123).

provide equitable education to economically disadvantaged communities, its implementation faced difficulties almost from the start. The number of central schools was increased to 63 across the country⁸ but many did not have the infrastructure, the requisite number of teachers and the boarding capacity to cope with the increase in the number of students. As a case in point, Kuensel, reported that Kilikhar Central School in Mongar only had 74 beds for 132 boarding students. The students had to share beds in the hostels which would have posed a risk of the spread of communicable diseases, such as seasonal viral fever, the common flu, and cholera. Moreover, overcrowded hostels are not conducive for studying. Students were accommodated in temporary sheds, staff room, and meeting hall.

With resources overstretched, the school could not take in students from the neighbouring Chhali and Tsakaling lower secondary schools. As a result, the students were sent to Gyalpoishing Higher Secondary School. However, in 2017, that school was upgraded to a College of Information Technology under the Royal University of Bhutan by a government executive order.^{9 10}

This same lack of resources was found in other central schools, which indicates that schools were being upgraded to the status of central schools without having the resources to meet basic requirements. In 2014, the government introduced the autonomous school policy to address the quality of education and gave state schools the option to apply for autonomous school status, giving the school principals a certain degree of financial leverage.

However, because of a change in policy, that status was rescinded prior to the end of the government's tenure. To improve teaching techniques and English language proficiency, the government initiated two national level professional development courses for school teachers named Transformative Pedagogy and English for Effective Communication.¹¹ The study on the impact of this initiative is yet to be conducted. Curriculum reforms were also introduced. As an example, in the primary schools,

⁸Annual Education Statistics (2018: 1-2).

⁹Phuntsho (2017).

¹⁰Royal University of Bhutan 2019. Retrieved from <http://www.rub.edu.bt/index.php/en/teaching-learning/colleges/constituent-colleges>

¹¹The Bhutan Broadcasting Service (BBS, 2014). Retrieved from <http://www.bbs.bt/news/?p=36243> Wangdi (2016). Retrieved from <http://www.kuenselonline.com/teachers-introduced-to-transformative-pedagogy/>, Rinzin (2017). Retrieved from <http://www.kuenselonline.com/ministry-launches-english-for-effective-communication/>

Environmental Science was removed from the curriculum and the concepts and themes were incorporated into the English and Dzongkha language curriculum. Some educators felt that this move weakened the learning of Environmental Science concepts at the foundation level as focus would be shifted to languages instead.¹² In a bid to bring learning into the 21st century, the/government introduced the concept of research-based teaching and learning using Information Communications Technology (ICT).

World History for Classes XI and XII was changed from a reliance on textbooks to one that was supported by technology and the Internet. However, it became a challenge to provide adequate digital infrastructure support to both urban and rural schools equally. Although some schools welcomed the idea of this new approach others voiced the need for reliable and adequate Internet and library resources to be put in place before implementing the new curriculum.

For the current Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa (DNT) government (2018 - 2023), education continues to be a priority. The party promises to elevate the teaching profession, make education inclusive and enhance classroom facilities.¹³ In addition, the DNT government pledges to:

- Remove the cut off points for Class X students to enable them to continue studying until Class XII;
- Cancel Saturday classes;
- Do away with examinations until Class VI;
- Make teaching a profession to vie for by offering the best and most prestigious scholarships;
- Raise the pay and allowances for teachers and more administrative and support staff to ease teacher workload;
- Review the central school system to make it better and reopen strategic community and primary schools that are useful and beneficial in certain communities.¹⁴

¹²18th National Education Conference, MoE Resolution. Personal communication with English Curriculum Developer, the Royal Education Council, Paro.

¹³DNT Manifesto (2018: 7).

¹⁴DNT Manifesto (2018: 63).

These radical changes - doing away with lower primary (PP-Class III) examinations, no minimum academic cut off point in Class X to qualify for Class XI and awarding of government scholarships for students to study in private schools - seemed noble and attractive when they were introduced. However, the resultant increase in the number of students going onto the higher grades have created some serious challenges that have hindered the delivery of quality and equitable education: inadequate school infrastructure; teacher preparedness; and the availability of teachers. The lack of boarding facilities is one major concern. This has meant that some teenage students have to rent and live in private apartments away from their parents. As a result, the adolescents may be introduced to sexual life, have easy access to alcohol and drugs and other types of social ills of urban life. This may, in particular, affect teenage girls in the form of unwanted pregnancies, abortion related complications and even untimely deaths.

Doing away with Saturday classes called for a revision of the curriculum and the number of instructional hours in schools. And following the MoE's 19th National Education Conference's Resolution in 2019,¹⁵ the Royal Education Council reviewed the existing textbooks, removed irrelevant content and amended the mistakes found.¹⁶ However, there was no opportunity to conduct comprehensive research on the curriculum and provide an evidence-based policy advisory support. A concern is whether all these policy changes have, in actual fact, contributed towards attaining quality education. During a televised discussion on the government's education reforms, the education minister commented that the results will be known in two years.¹⁷

Although teachers are an indispensable part of school education, teaching is still viewed as a demanding profession with low remuneration. In recent years, there has been a growing trend of teachers leaving the profession. The MoE's 2018 education statistics stated that "about 3.6 percent of 8,824 teachers in public schools leave the profession every year."¹⁸ In 2017 and 2018, about 355 state school teachers left for various reasons - termination of service, retirement or they had finished their contracts - but most chose to leave as, what MoE referred to as "voluntary resignation".

¹⁵The BBS live public discussion on education, 26 April 2019.

¹⁶The 19th National Education Conference, 2019.

¹⁷The BBS live public discussion on education, 26 April 2019.

¹⁸The 19th National Education Conference, 2009.

Among the “voluntary resigned” group are some young, energetic, industrious, and forward-looking teachers. Most of them left to go overseas to upgrade their educational qualifications, earn higher wages, seek international exposure, or even migrate to better their lives.¹⁹

In Finland and Singapore teachers are highly respected, have better remuneration and rigorous professional development. In Singapore, for example, teachers receive about “100 hours of training” annually to stay abreast of the latest teaching techniques.²⁰ Finland advanced from an agrarian to an industrial country through “an equal school system, a science-based teacher training programme, a high regard for teachers, and high quality teaching in schools.”²¹ Therefore, an excellent set of teachers is indispensable to high quality education and a nation’s advancement. Our government’s pledge to elevate the status of the teaching profession is most timely. If the best and brightest minds are attracted to teaching through “the best and most prestigious scholarships” as outlined, it is a realistic and a sustainable solution to attain quality education.

As His Majesty the King aptly states, “Education is empowering - it’s a social equaliser and it facilitates self-discovery, which leads to realising one’s full potential... Good education gives you confidence, good judgment, virtuous disposition, and the tools to achieve happiness successfully.”²²

This implies that good education is viewed as the critical means to liberation from cyclic sufferings like the Buddha taught. It also means that quality education facilitates a fulfilled human life according to Aristotelian thought and a prerequisite to building an enlightened citizen for better governance as Jefferson proposed. Thus, education is a serious, life-changing force and every government’s vision should transcend the five years of its tenure.

¹⁹Annual Education Statistics (2018: 33 and 37).

²⁰Ura (2019), retrieved from Ura Sonam’s Facebook Profile on 23.4.2019.

²¹Helsingin Yliopisto (2018, retrieved from <https://www.helsinki.fi/en/news/education-news/kirsti-lonka-education-lifted-finland-out-of-poverty-but-we-need-to-keep-developing-to-remain-at-the-cutting-edge?gclid=...> on 25.4.2019

²²Ministry of Education (2014).

Should Education Modify Politics?

To reiterate, education is vital for a country's development. Excellent education will produce educated minds and knowledgeable, skillful citizens needed for governance. Proactive and engaged citizens can improve politics. These citizens will have the intelligence to differentiate between clean and corrupt politics, virtue and vice, good and bad governance. Virtuous and caring citizens will have the ability to recognise the facts, gain the necessary skills, and aspire to play a part in democratic governance.²³

In Bhutan's context, politics and education are closely related. Education is shaped by successive elected governments' changing education policies. If politics can have an impact on education, it is possible for education to have an effect on politics. At present, Bhutan's general literacy rate is about 71.4 percent.²⁴ A fully literate society will be well informed and can shape public views. Thus, education can energise politics through caring and active citizenry in the form of well-planned sustainable educational policies beyond five years to attain the nine citizens' attributes articulated in 'Bhutan Education Blueprint 2014-2024: Rethinking Education'.²⁵ The attributes stressed "character building, life-long learning habits, importance of family, community and national values, physical and psychological well-being and sense of identity, knowledge and skills".²⁶

Conclusion

Education is the catalyst that empowers citizens and builds nations. Empowered citizens who are intelligent, caring, dynamic, responsive and professional could help create a flourishing GNH-society. Empowered citizens will be able to build trust between the government and the governed. However, short term, quick-fix policies will do more damage than add value to existing good practices in the education system. Therefore, viable, long-term educational policies must be continued from one elected government to the next. If Bhutan has to live its GNH philosophy, education is the answer to groom a happy, able, and fulfilled citizenry.

²³Ijov and Sar (2015:16).

²⁴Ministry of Education (2014:65).

²⁵Ministry of Education, Bhutan Education Blueprint 2014-2024: Rethinking Education

²⁶Ministry of Education (2014:65). Annual Education Statistics (2018:4).