

Curriculum Autonomy for Bhutanese Schools: A Fitting Solution to the Current Crisis in Bhutanese Education System

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to address the current crisis in Bhutan's education system by proposing a shift towards providing curriculum autonomy to schools. Drawing on George S. Counts' theory of 'Dare the School Build a New Social Order,' it discusses the limitations of the centralized curriculum system and its impact on Bhutanese education. By examining issues such as the centralized textbook distribution, the propagation of 'Diploma Disease,' and the need for decentralization, the paper argues for delinking schools from the central curriculum and empowering them with more autonomy. This shift is seen as essential to promote relevant education, provide better opportunities, and enhance the overall education quality.

Key Words: curriculum autonomy; bhutanese education system; formal schooling; diploma disease

DOI:

10.56916/ijess.v2i2.473

Article History:

Received 2023-06-19

Accepted 2023-09-15

INTRODUCTION

The extant state of Bhutan's education system is marked by substantial limitations and challenges. Recognizing the deficiencies in the current education system, Bhutan initiated a significant reform effort. This reform, initiated by a royal decree issued by His Majesty the King in December 2020, acknowledges the necessity of reevaluating the entire education system (Kuensel, 2020). Royal decree is the highest order instruction as per Bhutan's constitution. Among many critical aspects of our education that have been highlighted in the royal decree, most surround the issue of how the current curriculum has now become irrelevant. The phrase in the decree that says, *"We must revisit our curriculum, pedagogy, learning process, and assessments to either transform or rewrite them in view of the challenges and opportunities of the twenty-first century."* is a clear indication that the current curriculum has not been effective in promoting neither relevant education nor providing better employment opportunities. Almost all of the challenges that Bhutan is facing today both as a developing nation and a growing democracy have their roots in the way children are schooled. Bhutan still follows a system of centralized curriculum though the nation herself has transitioned to democracy. It's not so much the 'what' but how the curriculum is rolled out is the problem.

Therefore, recognizing that Bhutan's education system is currently facing significant challenges, this paper seeks to provide a unique perspective on addressing these issues. Unlike existing studies in the literature, this paper advocates for the introduction of curriculum autonomy as a fitting solution to the crisis. The central theme revolves around empowering schools and teachers to have greater control over what and how they teach. That way the approach of the study differentiates itself from conventional solutions.

Research Problem & Objectives

Research Questions:

1. What are the limitations of Bhutan's centralized curriculum system?
2. How does the centralized curriculum system contribute to the 'Diploma Disease' phenomenon?
3. What is the impact of a centralized curriculum on social hierarchy within Bhutanese society?
4. How does a centralized curriculum affect teacher professionalism and efficacy?

Objectives:

1. To identify and analyze the shortcomings of Bhutan's current centralized curriculum system.
2. To examine the role of the centralized curriculum in the proliferation of 'Diploma Disease.'
3. To assess the implications of a centralized curriculum on social stratification in Bhutan.

To explore the impact of the centralized curriculum on teacher professionalism and its consequences.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Bhutan's Current Curriculum System

Every school in Bhutan is mandated to follow the same set of curricula by the Ministry of Education and Skills Development (MoESD). Even private schools are not exempted from this blanket policy. The textbooks are developed by an autonomous institute called the Royal Education Council (REC) in collaboration with the Ministry of Education and other relevant agencies such as the Bhutan Council for School Examination and Assessment (BCSEA). These textbooks along with teacher manuals are distributed free of cost to all the schools (even the private schools) by the state. Schools follow a general curriculum that comprises mandatory subjects on languages (English & Dzongkha), social sciences (History, Geography, Social Studies), natural sciences (Physics, Chemistry, Biology) mathematics, and a few elective subjects such as Agriculture, Economics, ICT and Environmental Science until Grade 10. After grade 10 schooling is streamlined into three major streams of Commerce, Science and Arts until Grade 12. This is again no different in private schools either, solely because the parent agency, MoESD, in this case, requires every school in the country to follow the same course of schooling.

Schools across the nation even follow the same academic calendar. In fact, these calendars too are dictated by the MoESD and subsequently by the district education offices. Further, the center specifies the number of hours that should be dedicated to each subject.

Teacher manuals on the other hand specify what is to be taught and how they should be taught. Promotion criteria and continuous assessment schemes are developed and distributed by the center. High-stakes examinations in Grade 10 and Grade 12 are conducted by BCSEA but the test development is done in close consultation with REC. Therefore, what is required to be taught by MoESD and REC is assessed by BCSEA, failing to get through this assessment hurdle means that the student has to either repeat or find some alternatives outside Bhutan.

All in all, schools across Bhutan are dictated on almost every matter by the center just as George S. Counts concluded how most schools function when he said, "On all genuinely crucial matters the school follows the wishes of the groups or classes that actually rule the society; on minor matters the school is sometimes allowed a certain measure of freedom" (Flinders & Thornton, 2004). This happens to be the exact case with Bhutan too, because schooling is provided free of cost by the state until Grade 10, and then based on academic merit after that.

Issues with Centralized Curriculum

Centralized Curriculum poses four main issues. Firstly, it has made Bhutanese subscribe to the notion of 'one size fits all' because of the center legitimizing knowledge which has resulted in limited or

no choice at all for students and parents, thereby churning out the same kind of graduates the society often complains about. Secondly, due to this limited choice, a large number of children feel compelled to attend schools just for the sake of certification thereby promoting Diploma Disease at a national scale. Thirdly this has resulted in an aggravated situation of extreme social hierarchy creating polarized groups just based on one curriculum, almost entirely ignoring the other aspects and courses of learning. Last, but not least, (*In fact the most important*) centralized curriculum has converted diversely skilled teachers into a mere group of professionally impotent and socially useless people.

Detailed Analysis

1. Issue of Legitimized Knowledge

In Bhutan, REC is the agency with the mandate to develop the national school curricula. It might sound sufficiently appropriate if one concludes that there's a dedicated institution that develops the curriculum for Bhutanese schools. However, it is when one looks beyond the name of the institution that we realize that at the helm of the curricula-developing task for Bhutan are 23 so-called curriculum developers headed by one dean. Interestingly there is only one female among these curriculum developers for the entire Bhutan (REC, 2018). This means that what 169,074 students in 535 schools across Bhutan (MoE, 2020) should learn, is largely determined by what these 23 individuals think is necessary, appropriate, and worthy. However competent they are at developing curriculum; whatever their educational background; regardless of their views on education or life; wherever they come from, the minuscule number of 23 is too limited to determine a purposive and comprehensive curriculum for 169,074 students. Further, it is clearly a male-dominated group which even raises the doubt of whether the current textbooks are gender biased in themselves. This is exactly the kind of limitation that Michael W. Apple points out in his paper on 'The Culture and Commerce of the Textbook' when he says "...concentration does not tell the entire story. Internal factors work in these firms, what their backgrounds and characteristics are, and what their working conditions happen to be – also play a significant part."

So, how can a curriculum designed by a few people possibly be relevant to hundreds and thousands of children? Therefore, the argument remains whether dictating what should be taught in schools via a centralized curriculum only propagates the herd mentality. It poses many limitations just by its design - not being able to cater to the ever-expanding needs of students, parents, and society resulting in mediocre citizens, being the prime negative outcome (Jang, 2017; Maruatona, 2002). Every child's needs are different owing to his or her different background, interests, abilities, etc (Florian & Beaton, 2018). Even if the center succeeds in understanding some essential common needs, never will it ever be able to generalize the various individual needs, which are much greater in number than the common needs. Therefore, it is a moral crime to think that a curriculum that has been designed by a few people can be useful to hundreds and thousands of children growing up in a different time with innumerable needs.

Curriculum developers need to understand that what is best for the students of the capital city Thimphu cannot be entirely appropriate for the students of the remote villages of Laya and Lingzhi, and vice-versa. When it takes a village to raise a child, how can one curriculum cater to the needs of all the children in Bhutan? It is, therefore, in the best interest of the children and future of Bhutan, that the centre stop dictating what schools should teach.

Instead, the objectives and expected outcomes alone would enable the schools to do so much more, and yet adequately cater to the needs of their students. Curriculum experts at REC could be of more help if their time and effort were directed toward researching and building frameworks and resources other than textbooks and teacher manuals. They could instead help teachers frame their syllabus and

lessons because teachers know what their children's needs are more than a group of curriculum developers tucked away in an office somewhere very far from the daily happenings of the school. If there's an area where they might require some help, it should just be some technical know-how of how to go about transforming their ideas into a teachable curriculum.

2. Issue of Diploma Disease

So, what happens when there's no room for customization in the syllabus one has to learn at school? It is quite obvious that many children must be attending school only because they are required to do so by their parents/guardians or the general notion that schools lead to better jobs and eventually better lives (Harber & Harber, 2021). These groups of children make peace with these unfair curricula by doing the bare minimum, just so that they can proceed from one grade to the other and eventually be certified with a school diploma of some sort that they can produce for employment purposes.

Bhutan's never-ending issue of unemployment, more specifically youth unemployment (Tenzin, 2019; Wangmo, 2012; Yangchen, 2017) is evidence in itself that because many students have failed to find any meaning in this centralized curriculum that doesn't suit their individual interests, they eventually graduate with neither a clear-cut direction for future endeavors, nor any competence needed to meet the requirements of the job market. Bhutan has been facing youth unemployment issues for years now. In this regard, one aspect that has been repeatedly highlighted is that graduates do not have adequate competencies even in the basic communication skills of reading, writing, and speaking (Bhandari, 2018). Now, if that isn't a sign of Diploma Disease, what is?

However, the main question remains, why has Bhutan produced too many incompetent youths over the years? This is because all Bhutanese children have been forced to learn and follow but one standard curriculum. Some clearly couldn't relate to, or enjoy what the center deemed appropriate for them. They are not a group of incompetent youths. They are just differently inclined towards learning and education. Their interests are diverse. However, the schools in Bhutan don't respect these unique qualities and attitudes because there is just one curriculum no matter what children are interested in.

This curriculum is also primarily academic-based (Gyeltshen & Zangmo, 2020). Textbooks and passing examinations rule the assessment aspect of this curriculum. Very limited emphasis is given to developing other skills and competencies and that too is done through a few extra-curricular activities, which don't count much in the child's progression from one grade to the other. This is exactly why children who are not academically inclined end up going to school, following the rituals and routines just to secure diplomas that society requires of them, thereby spreading Diploma Disease at a national scale.

3. Issue of Social Hierarchy

This eventually resulted in a divided society. There's a distinct line drawn between those who succeed with the current curricula and those who don't (Editor, 2020). Children who can relate to these curricula do well and land good jobs in the public or private sectors. However, those who don't succeed are often grouped into less productive categories by society. Unfortunately, the basis of this differentiation is predominantly a centralized curriculum written by dozens of people.

Further, the latter group is left with no encouragement at all to pursue vocational training and skills-based employment subsequently (Lamsang, 2012). It is important to note that the curricula being discussed here are not just a product of a few people but are largely non-vocational and extremely literary/theoretical in nature. Therefore, when talking about the social hierarchy, it means the society who can read, write and communicate well are given higher regard and respect than others who might be equally talented in different fields such as creative arts, entertainment, vocational skills, etc.

Due to this social outlook (which is the product of the entire nation following one curriculum), Bhutan still imports laborers from India for construction, automobile workshops, plumbing, etc. though countless unemployed graduates are lying idle in the nation (CBD, 2019). These youths prefer going outside Bhutan in order to be employed in blue-collar jobs, and one of the reasons is this social stereotyping on which job is better and which one is not.

Now, if this is not a negative impact of a centralized curriculum, which has ignored many social values placing academic achievement above everything, why would the graduates possibly grow up with this divided mindset? There possibly can't be any other reason for this. Instead of the entire nation following the same set of curricula, if schools had the autonomy over what to offer their children, would this division and categorization of who is better and who not exist so profoundly? No! Instead, every talent or competence would have received its due credit because of its sheer diversity.

4. Issue of Invading Teachers' Professional Pride

More than anything, the centralized curriculum plays the role of an undisputed and unquestionable criminal who continues to slay teacher efficacy across the nation (Runté, 1998). Teachers do not enjoy being told exactly what to teach and how to teach it (Kiziltepe, 2006). Truly, this is the primary deterrent for teachers to give their best. Every teacher would do an excellent job if he or she were simply provided with the broad framework and the freedom to achieve it. Should the doubts be over if some teachers would do their job well, the answer is no. There will be some who might take advantage of the autonomy but these few teachers wouldn't do damage at a national scale like the current curriculum is doing. It definitely won't go on for long as these non-performing teachers will eventually see their exits.

However, what is happening currently? Teachers of different levels of competency and creativity are mechanized and automated to do the exact same thing that the syllabus and teacher manuals spell out for them. Therefore, mandatory textbooks and manuals do one thing and one thing alone. They remove the professional pride of the teachers.

Instead, empowering teacher engagement in creative/critical thinking, decision-making, and problem-solving in order to deliver the daily lessons, have a higher chance of spontaneously transmitting the life skills education to the students. If not, one hundred years from now we will still be 'teaching' life skills theoretically and in isolation, which would not find its way into the everyday life of the student.

Even more so is the fact to realize the important role teachers can play as social mediators in this initial period of democracy. If Bhutan's democracy is to strengthen, teachers have the social responsibility as well as the moral obligation towards being the social transformers. George S. Counts points out that teachers can 'positively influence the social attitudes, ideals, and behavior of the coming generation' if they are permitted sufficient autonomy to fashion their own curriculum (Flinders & Thornton, 2004). It also allows schools to become centers for social regeneration instead of being political propaganda spreaders of the ruling party.

Therefore, instead of letting the teachers enjoy autonomy, if they are even told what to do in school, there's not a sliver of a chance for them to find time to play their actual role because they are busy fulfilling the needs of the center instead of the society.

5. Why Autonomy?

Just as George S. Counts concluded his theory of how schools can build social order if teachers are provided with due autonomy over how they should function and what they should teach in school by saying, "...technology be released from the fetters and the domination of every type of special privilege; and second, that the resulting system of production and distribution be made to serve directly the masses

of the people.”, it would be only educationally and socially wise if schools in Bhutan were also freed from the control that the center exerts right now.

The Bhutanese government should stop spending an unnecessary amount of money on textbooks year in and year out, not to mention that these textbooks are often outdated even before they get to the schools, and focus more on empowering schools to develop their curriculum aligning with the national vision and local contexts. If schools are provided with the autonomy to determine the materials and activities/programs (in alignment with the national vision), considering its structural, locational, faculty strengths, etc., then children could inevitably have greater choice over the kind of school/education they so desire. Consequently, schools choosing to specialize in various aspects according to their strengths could result in an exciting variety of quality schools, which could not only provide the required academic opportunities, but much more to our students.

For instance, it is not only funny but embarrassing that Bhutan still follow a prescribed curriculum for subjects such as ICT, when everything to do with IT is advancing in minutes and seconds. Of course, it is no different from the other subjects. What is even more ridiculous is that even the texts for essays, stories, and poems to be taught, are also dictated by the center. This should stop if we are to encourage creativity. Removing such requirements has the potential to empower teachers to create higher-quality and more relevant materials without losing time.

Discussion

The findings of this study underscore the limitations of the centralized curriculum system and its detrimental effects on Bhutanese education. These findings emphasize the need for curriculum reform. Furthermore, the study highlights the negative impact of the current curriculum on social hierarchy and teacher professionalism. These findings are consistent with previous research, demonstrating the persistent nature of the issues faced by Bhutan's education system. It is therefore, the study proposes schools in Bhutan be delinked from the excessive control of the central government just as Ivan Illich proposed the idea of a De-Schooling Society (Illich et al., 1971). However, in Bhutan's case, just de-establishing the school curriculum instead of the entire schooling system as opposed to Illich would ultimately give teachers the chance to be not just potentially diverse educators but socially useful individuals.

The study's findings resonate with prior research, emphasizing the need for a shift away from the centralized curriculum. The issues identified, such as the propagation of 'Diploma Disease' and the reinforcement of social hierarchy, have been documented in the literature. Therefore, the proposed solution of curriculum autonomy aligns with the broader discourse on improving education in Bhutan.

CONCLUSION

We often advise the students on how important it is to secure their future, but the system within which they are learning is constructed to rob them of that very future by dictating what and how the teachers must instruct them, what good is that advice, and what good is that system. Therefore, the best way forward is to release schools and teachers from the stifling centralized curriculum and give them more freedom regarding what to teach and how to teach it. This will result in stronger schools, happier teachers, and superior students.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the literature by providing a comprehensive analysis of the challenges within Bhutan's education system. By advocating for curriculum autonomy and drawing on the findings, it offers a unique and practical solution to address the current crisis. The research contribution lies in the proposal to release schools and teachers from the centralized curriculum's constraints, ultimately leading to stronger schools, more satisfied teachers, and better-prepared students.

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