

Tharchen¹ Chantana Chanbanchong²

Pufa Savegpan³



A STUDY ON MANAGEMENT OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN BHUTANESE SCHOOL EDUCATION SYSTEM: POLICY, PRACTICES AND PERCEPTIONS

Abstract

Although the Primary Education is not compulsory in Bhutan, the Royal Government has managed to double its literacy within a decade. Bhutan's recently achieved its long time goal of Universal Primary Education. The gross enrolment rate in primary education was 106% in 2007. There is near gender equality (93%). The completion rate of primary education was 87% (Word Bank Report, 2008). Currently, we have around 150, 000 children enrolled in around 500 various learning institutions spread across the tiny nation.

Despite all above remarkable achievements, UNICEF report-2008 reveals 'there are over 3,300 children with immediate special learning needs in the country'. Education Ministry also admitted that "in all we have over 16,000 children who are still not able to access education for varied reasons', yet there will be additions of several thousand new entrants every year". Such an alarming figure of unenrollment and presence of special needs children in a country is a strong indication for an urgent call to do more and faster.

¹ Master Degree Program, Faculty of Education, Naresuan University

² Associate Professor Dr., Department of Educational Administration and Development, Faculty of Education, Naresuan University

³ Dr., Department of Education, Faculty of Education, Naresuan University

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The purpose of the study is to explicitly disclose how our Bhutanese School Education Policy is framed and implemented to promote inclusive education approaches in the country. Its content part explains different educational strategies and approaches to address necessary challenges lies in perusing inclusion in Bhutanese school education system.

The findings include; lack of inclusive policy guidelines, untrained teachers in inclusive field, rigidity of school curriculum, unequal opportunities through schooling programs, lack of alternative assessment for special need children, poor collaborations among the stakeholders and exclusion of many disabled and special need children on various grounds.

Key Terms: *Inclusive education, special needs, Bhutanese education policy, inclusive management.*

Introduction

Education is a basic human right of every individual, and considered to be indispensable means to ascertain and safeguard other human rights such as; to secure good health, security, liberty, economic well beings and for participation in the social and political activity. Access to quality education will further strengthen one's ability to enjoy and promote fundamental rights such as opportunity, freedom, justice and equity in all the social services.

Modern education system came to Bhutan as early as 1950, with the inception of modern education system in the country, Bhutan became as one of the first countries to ratify the convention on rights of the child (1990). With such international resolution in place, government has provided every possible support and opportunities to all children in the country to avail basic education at free of cost.

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“Access to basic education has become an inalienable of all Bhutanese and it is a key to the most of the nation's ambitions” stated in (vision document-2020, p52). Similar commitments were shared through Education Strategy doc (2003) that “All children with disabilities and with special educational needs – including those with physical, mental and other types of impairment will be able to access and benefit from education”.

Guided by strong visions ahead, ministry of education is committed to expand educational opportunities to all those un-reached communities, mainly focusing on quality and accessibility of education to all Bhutanese children by 2013. Therefore, developing a proper mechanism of ‘inclusive education’ to include those displaced children into mainstream is one of the urgent priorities to be addressed by the government.

Inclusive education is the only possible approach, which attempts to bring together all children from different backgrounds - family, cultural, social, religions, economic, disability and those with diverge educational needs into a single mainstream, whereby they learn to live together, abiding by the principles of trust, respect, acceptance and understanding towards one another.

However, making of all children to learn in a mainstream demands a clear policy, huge resources, sacrifices, infrastructure, commitments, strong collaboration and, above all welcoming attitudes from all the stakeholders; including policy makers, educators, parents and children themselves.

Objectives:

1. To study the Inclusive Education Policies in Bhutanese School Education System.
2. To study the current state of Management of Inclusive Education practices in Bhutanese schools as viewed by educators.

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3. To compare the state of inclusive education practices as viewed by teachers and principals of the schools.

4. To study the perception of stake holders concerning management of inclusive education in schools.

Methodology:

1. The study was conducted through Mixed Model of Approach. A quantitative approach of 40 questionnaires used for 360 educators (comprising 102 administrators and 150 school teachers).

2. In-depth interview was conducted with policy makers, administrators, school officials, parents and children. Classroom observations were made in the visited schools. A detail review was made into the related policy documents.

3. Findings from the questionnaires were analyzed through SPSS program and a review result of policy documents were presented in a statement form.

Summary of findings

a) Policy matters

An urgent need of national school education policy in the country is realized, after viewing the failure of general education guidelines in discharging adequate responsibilities and accountabilities on educators, in educating children with disabilities and special education needs in the school. An absence of separate inclusive education guidelines has further left teachers with inadequate preparedness to handle those special needs children into a mainstream classroom.

Bhutanese schools implement 100% national based school curriculum. All the content, scope and structures of any teaching subjects were decided and framed by the central curriculum board. Teachers had very limited privilege in restructuring their subject

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contents, yet over 83% of educators claimed for the need to restructure curriculum to benefit all children. A lack of flexibilities in the school curriculum has increasingly denied the access of special needs children for their basic right to education.

Acknowledging the importance of inclusive education in the country, schools were piloted with new dimensions of Child Friendly School, initiated by UNICEF. Ministry of education is committed to further replicate child friendly approaches into more than 120 schools in the coming years. The schools will be prepared with necessary resources to accept and address the needs of all children, irrespective of their needs and abilities. The study reminds for the need of strict monitoring and assessment of those child friendly strategies by the concerned monitoring board.

Any promotion and up gradation of a child to next higher grade is totally decided through his/her performance in the final examination. Study found that; without proper guidelines on inclusion schools failed to frame any alternative mode of assessment to assess, monitor and evaluate the learning of special needs children in the class. However, only 41% of principals and 37% teachers said they use alternative assessment. Failure to develop separate alternative assessment standards for special needs children is likely to cause higher risk for their exclusion from school's accountability system.

b) Over management of Inclusive education

Two special learning institutes, one for visually impaired and other for hearing impaired children are operating at present and another three schools were identified as pilot schools where children with different forms of disability are to be taught into the mainstream. However, with the inception of Child Friendly Concept from 2005, UNICEF has identified seven

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schools in different districts, whereby, children with other forms of disabilities are enrolled into the mainstream and taught through least restrictive environment.

Following an adoption of inclusive approach into our school education system, there are positive indications such as; understanding child rights for education, increased parent's participation in school, conducting school self assessment, focus on child centered teaching, additional attentions for children with disabilities and special educational needs. This has made in around 97% of principals and 90.4% teachers believe that government should support inclusive education through additional funding for the schools.

Besides having no alternative mode of assessments in classroom learning, over 64% of educators accept the fact that children with disabilities and special needs are often discriminated from many other co- curricular activities conducted in the school. A system of conducting schooling programs on competition bases and a disciplined rule and nature of game has also strongly discriminated disabled and special needs children from their right of equal participation into their learning activities.

An annual School Improvement Plan (SIP) drawn by the school personals were largely limited on to the infrastructural development of school alone; lesser importance and initiatives were addressed in promoting academic competency of children, strengthening the school community relationships, building teacher-parent associations, enhancing teacher's professionalism...etc.

More than 78% of administrators, teachers and parents were convinced that inclusive education is the only living approach to cater educational opportunities for those excluded ones. An educational sensitization programs has really created awareness among all the stake

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holders including rural parents and community members, yet they accept that education is an indispensable rights for one's life.

An Individual Education Plan (IEP), particularly framed to assist learning of those disabled and diverse educational needs children, is still not implemented in many inclusive schools. Many school officials pretended to be not aware of the planning format, so there is a risk for teachers not being able to provide focused academic attention to special need children in classroom.

Producing special trained teachers according to needs of the children is one of the challenges that government is addressing on. The need of separate teachers was indicated by over 99% of principals and 93% teachers, who supported that special need children are to be taught by special trained teachers. Similarly, over 93% of educators also believe that children with special needs are at higher risk of leaving out of school, if they were not given timely intervention in the form of inclusive settings.

Despite, government's support and school's initiatives towards inclusiveness; untrained teachers in special need field, inaccessible school infrastructures, inadequate supply of appropriate teaching learning materials, rigid curriculum policy and poor community support, narrow societal view are some of the factors which might still challenge the performance of special need children in the school, this is further backed by over 73% of educators who believe that, many Bhutanese children with special needs and learning disabilities are still left excluded without attending the schools.

c) Perceptions

At a time to acknowledge the urgency of parent's participation needed in the school, as overwhelmingly supported by 77% of principals and 80% teachers. Many teachers in the

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field still choose to setback with parent's involvement into the school's daily teaching affairs, some teachers still assume that majority of the parents were not literate enough to make positive contribution towards their children's learning; thereby undermining parent's expertise, rights and responsibility in their children's education.

School officials do agree that; lack of accessibility, poor educational background, poverty, lack of proper educational awareness were some of the risk contributing factors, which attributed for exclusion of many disadvantaged and disabled children from the school education system, with majority in the rural communities. On other hand parents still view with optimism and fell satisfied with what their children receive from their school education; although their participatory role in children's academic achievement is being largely undermined and ignored.

Although, 95% of educators strongly feels that; collaboration between school, community and teachers were very essential for the over all development of school; the study revealed that there is a perception of weak collaboration between school and community, teachers and parents, even among teachers. Educated parents argued that, with poor collaboration, they do not receive enough opportunity to take part in the school's decision making process which affects the learning of their children daily life.

The study found that selection of inclusive pilot schools were not based on feasibility criteria. Many piloted schools despite, their acute shortages in specialized teachers and facilities; they are not safely located, thereby experiencing threat from environmental barrier, such as flooding and falling boulders. Most schools are located on off roads and isolated from the main community; these has not only affected easy accessibility for monitoring and

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community collaboration, but also failed to impart skills and knowledge to rest of the schools in the regions.

A strong sense of willingness is visible among the school administrators and teachers in admitting and accepting those children with disabilities; and special needs, despite, their ill preparedness to cater classroom education based on the individual need and ability of these children. Behind the doors teachers teaching in special education unit are expecting some additional financial incentives from the government, with 68.4% of teachers believe as an extra burden for them, so claiming for additional sacrifices and commitments they input.

Discussions

Following the global commitments to provide Education for All by 2015, Bhutan has made an immense achievement in the provision of free basic education till high school levels. "Bhutan recently achieved its long term goal of universal primary education, but faces challenges in raising quality of education and access to secondary education", stated in World Bank Report, 2008, that indicates government is already on the track towards attaining goals of Education for All by 2015.

However, the rapid growth of education system in the country is experiencing challenges such as; training adequate teachers as per the demand, achieving accessibility, maintaining quality of education, preparing children with adequate skills required in the job market and in making education more accessible for those disadvantaged children through mainstream learning.

Various new approaches are being implemented to address the challenges, realizing that we face these new challenges with same old strategies and policies. Much stronger pressure was expressed through royal speech in Convocation (2009), urging that "we must

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build an education system that nurtures people with the right skills, knowledge and training to fulfill this vision, the sooner we realize this, the better”.

The recent achievement of universal primary education was backed through its gross enrollment of 106% in 2007 and nearly 93% gender equality, which has contributed for almost 87% of completion rate from primary education. Despite all these achievements we still have 12-15% of the school going age children left without attending the school.

Statistics of the Academic year, 2008

slno	Type of School	Numbers	Teachers	Students
1.	Primary	342	1,922	52,515
2.	Secondary	133	2,804	80,998
3.	Higher Secondary	24	754	16,155
4.	Tertiary Institutes	10	695	4,190
5.	Private Schools	24	388	7,468
6.	Vocational Institutes	7	105	1,284
7.	Special Institutes	2	14	68
8.	Total	542	6682 (11% Non-Bhutanese)	162,678

Courtesy: (Education Statistics, 2008. Policy and Planning Division, Ministry of Education)

Inaccessibility because of poor family background, physical barriers, environmental, followed by narrow societal views, represent as challenges encountered by disabled and special needs children in the country. However, greater political will with support, educational awareness, financial support, promoting parents participation, extending education facilities to

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the rural communities are likely to enhance accessibility of these disadvantaged children to education.

The scope and ability of inclusive education in improving the accessibility and quality in school education has in fact received late recognition from the central government. Now with over 16,000 children in the country being displaced from the education system, an urgent call is for the need in restructuring the school management system based on inclusive principles and ideologies, because these inclusive beliefs were based on recognizing individual rights, learning to learn together, respecting individual differences, and abiding by democratic values.

An ideal inclusive education approach encourages for a decentralized schooling system that demand further empowerment for the participants with greater responsibility to make own decisions based on their needs and capabilities. All the educators, particularly, parents and children need to be empowered with equal opportunities and skills to enhance their participation in their learning process. Carol, (1996) said, schools must believe that both teachers and parents have expertise and decision making rights and he further reiterated that parents have the power to make decisions concerning the education of their children.

At a time when teachers are placed with more responsibility and accountability for children's learning, there need to be some room for freedom and flexibility for teachers in deciding on what they are going to teach to their children; in other way the curriculum policy must provide certain autonomy for the school to restructure its content and presentations, based on needs of their school children.

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Above all, the government offer its full commitments toward achieving Education for All by 2015, for which the 9th plan is “to establish inclusive education (for children who are physically and mentally challenged) to enable them to take part in the general education that is provided to all children, so they could live with dignity and participate in development of the Bhutanese society”. It was further supported by Ministry's vision strategy (2003) “All children with disabilities and with special educational needs – including those with physical, mental and other types of impairment – will be able to access and benefit from education”.

Aiming to meet her ambitious commitments, government has taken major initiatives to address the challenges; - many more teachers were recruited and trained, school infrastructures were up-graded, Extended Classrooms (ECR) systems were introduced in rural communities, parental awareness program is underway, new monitoring tools were implemented, schools were empowered to make decisions and planning, Child Friendly (CFS) concepts were piloted and major budget allocation has been approved by the government in the current plan of (2008 -2009).

Limitations

1. Inclusive education being a new approach into our Bhutanese education system and with lack of specialized people in the field, study could not gather an in depth information over inclusive management in Bhutanese context.
2. The study has a limited scope in identifying both the challenges and impact of inclusive education towards defining its policy, curriculum and in daily school management.
3. Due to limited financial support, study could not cover many more inclusive schools in southern and eastern regions, so any further study in the related field must focus in those un-reached areas.

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Recommendations:

The strong national commitments and measures taken by government to address the challenges to ensure Education for All by 2015 has been highly acknowledged and respected throughout the proceedings of this research study. However, at a final rally here, few recommendations are to be made to further strengthen the mechanism of inclusive education in pursuing its aim within a targeted time period.

Ministry of Education, RGoB needs to develop a stringent national school education policy, essentially aiming to address and promote inclusive education in all the schools in the country. The policy objectives should offer more attention towards ensuring accessibility and quality learning for all children despite their abilities, need and differences. Provisions should also focus in creating reliable future scope and opportunities for those disabled children and with special educational needs to lead their life independently.

The promotion of successful inclusive education in the country cannot be achieved through an effort Education Ministry alone. Recognizing the roles of different organizations and individuals, many research studies justified that a collaborative team approach between all the stakeholders such as; policy makers, administrators, teachers, parents and community members is necessary to attain the goals of inclusive education. All the individuals must work with a belief that everybody has a role, expertise and power to make decisions concerning the education of our children.

Enough evidences are presented over the fact that majority of the Bhutanese children those displaced belongs to poor family who still survives along poverty zones. Therefore, study urgently recommend government to put proper system in place to assess and evaluate the state of children living with disabilities and special needs in the country, this would assist

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Ministry to further priorities its support and assistance to those needy settlements in an efficient manner.

Besides implementing new monitoring tools, Ministry could think of creating a system of evaluating all schools at the end of every academic session. Evaluation should be based on their performance in previous academic session, with given more focus on their achievement towards wholesome education for all children. Also by rewarding those high achievers, these would further encourage individual school to perform better in their coming years.

Country World Bank Report (2008) says there is "*Weak institutional capacity at the central, district and school levels to effectively manage growth of primary and secondary education systems, weak monitoring of learning through testing, limited role of private sector, student's lack of preparedness for entering into the labor market*". This study also share similar findings and attempt to remind policy makers at the central level and all concerned administrators both at the district and school level to incorporate new management measures, so that any achievements of the school will be able to face any new challenges in the coming years.

Unemployment of youth is evident, when learning of children in the school fails to match with required skills and experiences demanded in the labor market. Such consequences could be resolved only through major reform in scope, content and structure of our school curriculum. In fact the teaching and learning process must be in focus to impart knowledge, skills and experiences based on the market demand and needs of individuals in times ahead.

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As Buddhist citizens, power of acceptance and willingness of our educators to integrate disabled and special need children into the mainstream is the foremost rewarding approach in promoting inclusive education in the country. But the preparedness of a teacher with required skills to handle those special need children is more important than anything else. Therefore, study recommends school teachers to be more aware of few educational approaches like Individual Education Plan (IEP), designing mode of alternative assessment and framing activities that offer equal opportunities for all learners. These will assist them in timely monitoring, assessing and evaluating their children's learning.

Over the years, ministry of education is committed in decentralizing the process of education system from central down to the districts and schools. Findings were visible that such initiatives had further placed greater responsibility and accountability over the administrators and educators in the field. Yet, it is urgent for the ministry to conduct timely assessment over the capability, need and skills of different institutions and should be encouraged with further empowerment in any planning and decision making process.

Finally study recommends other Bhutanese researchers to conduct further in depth research over the global impact and challenges of inclusive education, looking for different alternative measures to address its challenges. The findings and recommendations of this study can be used as bases for any further research in the field.

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