



Reflections on Educational Reforms: A Journey of Profound Awakening - In humble tribute to His Majesty Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck's 42nd Birth Anniversary

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<http://doi.org/10.17102/rabsel.22.1.0> | Accepted November 2021 | Published August 2022

Abstract

A review of the literature reveals that education is undergoing radical change affecting both the organization of educational institutions and the content and delivery of the curriculum. Considerable interest is being shown in the reengineering and reinventing of education by leading thinkers and scholars worldwide. Leaders and managers in educational institutions are increasingly faced with the challenge of having to operate in a rapidly changing world and within new and uncertain frameworks. Terminologies such as "educational system", "educational reform" and "educational change" have distinct meanings and implications. Educational reform implies that the reform initiative is an attempt to correct a deficiency in the existing educational system without changing the essential elements of the system. Educational change is a socio-political transformative process of change resulting in an educational system significantly different from the one before the change initiative. In educational reform, most aspects of the educational system remain the same and are understood to be inherently a political process. For discussion purposes, these terminologies have been used interchangeably in this article.

Introduction

This article presents a brief review of some dominant existing literature on education and educational reforms and is not intended to suggest any solution to initiating education reform in Bhutan. To this end, the impact of the pandemic may have far-reaching consequences for the way education is conducted in the future.

The Royal Kasho on Education Reform¹

The Royal Kasho of the Druk Gyalpo Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck on educational reform decrees:

In order to initiate a transformative re-conceptualization of our education system, I hereby grant this Kasho on the auspicious occasion of the 113th National Day in Punakha Dzong on 17th December 2020, corresponding to the Third Day of the Eleventh Month of the Male Iron Rat Year, in the exercise of the powers bestowed upon me by the Constitution. It expresses my deepest conviction about the irreplaceable role of education in the process of nation-building. I trust that a time-bound Council for Education Reform will prepare a visionary and workable roadmap for the twenty-first century to support the Royal Government of Bhutan in this august endeavor.

Furthermore, the former Education Minister (2008 -2013), Thakur S. Powdyel, on his Facebook Post of February 2, 2021, stated the sacredness and significance of the Royal Kashos as:

"Heavier than the mountain and more precious than gold"... This native Bhutanese wisdom best describes the depth, the breadth, and the significance of the two precious Decrees granted by Druk Gyalpo Jigme Khesar Namgyal Wangchuck to the people of Bhutan on the auspicious 20th day of the 12th month of the Iron Male Rat Year of the Bhutanese calendar corresponding to the 1st day of February 2021, consequent upon the Royal Address of His Majesty the King during the momentous 113th National Day celebrations at the historical Puna Dewa Chhenpoi Phodrang on December 17, 2020". His Majesty King Jigme Singye Wangchuck's royal vision conveyed through the Royal Kasho/Decree is timely and exerts a sense of urgency about the need for reform in the nation's education system.

Literature Review

In general, with increasing scrutiny of the education system and seemingly lagging outcomes, education is a site of conflict and thus deemed imperative to consider new, innovative approaches to improving and expanding education opportunities (Apple, 2016). The reform agenda would create ample opportunity for the education research council to study changes and investigate theoretical perspectives as well as explore a

variety of methodological approaches to empirical work and data analysis (Ranson, 1995).

The National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983) emphasized, The educational foundations of our society are being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our future as a Nation and as a people. What was unimaginable a generation ago has begun to occur -others are matching and surpassing our educational attainments (p.1).

The constantly evolving debates on educational reform share a common concern for the promotion of quality education. The process of educational change is much more complex than one can expect, even when apparent successes have exhibited fundamental flaws (Fullan, 2007). Generally viewed, education reform is the goal of changing public education and, at its core, is a belief that the needs and merits of students must be primary in all policy and actions that govern education (Cohen & Hill, 2008). Jarvis (1995) contended that education reform is theory as well as practice and provides the flexibility and freedom to educators to innovate and must aim to elevate and educate every child. Education plays the role of a key enabler in advancing the dialogue in sharing best practices, peer reviews, evidence-based and coherent policies, and strategies that can effectively address the problem of inequality and exclusion worldwide (Visvizi et al., 2018).

Reform calls for numerous changes such as more funding, better-trained teachers, desegregation, smaller class sizes, experienced teachers, well-maintained infrastructural facilities, and the need for stability (Rouse, 2000). The primary focus of educational innovations should be on teaching and learning theory and practice designed to produce the needed high-quality learning outcomes across the system (Serdyukov, 2017). Lin (2006) contends that there is a great need for educators to re-conceptualize education in the 21st century. A stronger curriculum, strong professional development, higher standards for entry into teaching, and broad accountability for results would form part and parcel of the worthy reforms and promising interventions must be welcomed (Neary, 2002). Educational reforms set ambitious goals for student learning. In order to prepare students for handling the complexity of modern societies, Haug and Mork (2021) argue that policy documents and educational reforms around the globe call for 21st-century skills. Defined as the integration of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics into a new cross-disciplinary subject in schools, the study of STEM offers students a chance to make sense of the integrated world we live in rather than learning fragmented bits and pieces of knowledge and practices about it (Dugger, 2010). In the global context, the changing educational landscape and the increasing interconnectedness and interdependence of the world place unprecedented demands on teacher education programs to prepare teachers to educate for the 21st-century global citizenship (Guo, 2014). Jerald (2009) advocated that key players in the reform process must not only include local and ministerial policymakers but also teachers. Arguably, a teacher is believed to be next to parents as the most important influence on

a child's life and thus it is critical not only in ensuring the quality of every educator but also in implementing a strong, data-driven, performance-based accountability system that teachers are rewarded and retained (Epstein, 2014). Lightfoot (2004) asserted that "...everyone believes that parents and teachers should be allies and partners. After all, they are both engaged in the important and precious work of raising, guiding, and teaching our children" (p. xx-xxi).

For former Education Minister, Thakur S. Powdyel:

A human teacher is critical in the scheme of education, even though we have learned a lot from technology and state-of-the-art resources as even the most efficient machines do not have feelings and sentiments and possess values that a human being has; so, in my scheme of things, the teacher occupies the center stage of education. We may have the finest resources, state-of-the-art equipment, and technology but if we do not have a motivated teacher, a passionate teacher, a teacher who celebrates teaching and has fun with teaching and with children. That is the kind of teacher that will bring powerful lessons to the class and engage children in meaningful, imaginative, and purposeful ways. This is the kind of teacher we are looking for today in the world. In an ideal situation, education should lead the society but today, unfortunately, it is the society, factories, corporations, and the employment agencies that are calling the tune. I feel it is not right. Education ought to think bigger, think wider, and think deeper. Education must be a few steps ahead of society, supposed to be nobler, it is supposed to be sublimer than what is the current engagement of the markets, factories, and corporations.

In the same vein, Davies and Ellison (1997) purported that education should be at the forefront of society's attempts to come to terms with this new reality of radical change. Good teachers are born, not made (Sparks & Hirsh, 2000), and teachers can be assisted to, "grow professionally or coordinate a formal professional development program to improve teachers' skills, knowledge and capabilities" (Verschueren & Koomen, 2012, p.9).

According to Hargreaves and Fullan (2015, Preface xii), "people care about the quality of teaching. And this notion is putting teachers and teaching at the forefront of change". Kelchtermans (2005) argue that the professional and meaningful interactions of teachers with their professional context contains a fundamental political dimension and that emotions reflect the fact that deeply held beliefs about good education are part of teachers' self-understanding. There is also a higher call on teachers that, "...Teachers should be pursuing moral purpose with greater and greater skill, conceptualizing their role on a higher plane than they currently do" (Fullan & Fullan, 1993, p.13). Hamano (2008) argues that it is critical for teachers to learn new methods of instruction and that teacher education needs to be strengthened to allow them to acquire these new methods. Barnes and Cross (2021) assert that teacher quality often emerges as a central issue in how education systems might be reformed to better address challenges faced

by modern economies and social structures undergoing constant global change. Toropova et al. (2021) consider that teacher job satisfaction merits closer attention as it is closely related to teacher retention, which also contributes to the well-being of teachers and their students, overall school cohesion, and enhanced status of the teaching profession. As Bushe and Kassam (2005) observed, there is a need to change the way we think before there is a change in behavior, "Curriculum, teacher expertise, and assessment have all been weak links in past education reform efforts" (Rotherham & Willingham, 2009, p.19) and that "devising a 21st-century skills curriculum requires more than paying lip service to content knowledge" (p.20). Orr and Cleveland-Innes (2015) recommend adopting unique appreciative leadership that includes strength-based practice, searching for the positive in people and organizations, and the role this plays in organizational innovation and transformation. Sharonova and Avdeeva (2019) pointed out that as capabilities of smart technologies expand and deepen reality:

They also change teaching practice, the functions, and the status of the teacher. The teacher ceases to be a source of knowledge, he, like students, is involved in the search game of extracting information from Big Data and creating new knowledge. Network communication of students and teachers forms network consciousness and network identity on the basis of previously unknown principles. The main thing there is not the Institute of education, but interaction. (p.2)

Fullan (1994) advocated that neither top-down nor bottom-up strategies for educational reform work and that a more sophisticated blend of the two would provide a solution in introducing needed reforms. Educational opportunity for all, as argued by Vandenbroucke (2015) has always been a defining progressive value, and living up to this ideal has taken on greater urgency. The growing consensus is that education is at the root of the country's broader economic challenges, and improvements to the education system offer the solution.

Luterbach and Brown (2011) noted that efforts to make education relevant to 21st-century learning may be enhanced if a group of educational stakeholders arrives at a consensus on issues concerning the 21st-century skills, ICT skills, teacher training, and school reform. Salmi (2001) asserts that higher education is facing unprecedented challenges at the start of the 21st century, influenced by the impact of globalization, knowledge-based economic growth, as well as the information and communication revolution. Meyer and Norman (2020) advocate that the current system of educational designs must be able to prepare students for challenges that are becoming increasingly complex and impactful. Levin (2001, 2004) suggests that education reform cannot succeed and should not proceed without much more direct involvement of students in all aspect as education policy is always proposed on the basis of the outcomes it will produce. Professor Pascale Quester (2021) from Australia Higher Education System emphatically asserts:

We need to really have the capacity to provide and scaffold the education around the individual, customize what it is people want and need at the time

whether they are in their career or their transition from one industry to another; so the flexibility, the agility, and customer-centricity that comes from understanding that education does not have to be a degree or nothing. I think this is where my university will certainly play a role in making sure that we have got a new cohort of people ready and prepared for having got a new cohort of people at whatever the future throws at them.

According to Clercq (1997), educational restructuring policy proposals are unlikely to become interventions that help bring about greater development, equity, participation, and redress if they are flawed in their conceptualization of the problems and misjudge the educational context and dynamics on the ground. Bell and Stevenson (2006) assert that "Leadership and learning are proving enduringly crucial concepts in contemporary debates on policy and practice regarding improving performance and achievement in education" (Series editors' foreword). One issue that is having a substantial impact on the education sector necessitating leaders to respond rapidly, is the worldwide, COVID-19 pandemic outbreak. This situation has necessitated a change in the approach to education and the requirement to lead teams remotely (Wilson, 2021). A huge challenge to education systems worldwide has been created by this outbreak, and many governments have ordered institutions to cease face-to-face instruction for most of their students, requiring them to switch, almost overnight, to online teaching and virtual education (Daniel, 2020). The monumental crisis provided the world an opportunity for change causing actions and reactions with dramatic consequences for social and economic life around the globe (Lawrenson, 2020). At the same time, the 21st-century approach to education is grappling with other goals that behavior analysis can also address, especially in broadening its focus from knowledge acquisition to real-world application, communication, and problem-solving so that it remains relevant and productive (John, 2015). Kidd and Murray (2020) stated:

As established practices changed quickly educators began developing pedagogic agility and despite the relocation to newly formed online spaces, many principles and 'intentionalities' of practice remained unchanged, as did the teacher educators' orientating values.

In an attempt to present the unique position of the Kingdom of Bhutan in transition from a medieval society to a modern nation-state, Powdyel (2006) highlights how the Bhutanese education system has transformed itself over the years to "blend the fruits of the best of the modern with the best of the traditional."

What matters most in Bhutan is happiness (Dixon, 2006). In their article, "*What explains Bhutan's Success Battling Covid-19?-The Diplomat*", Wangmo and Parikh(2020) stated, "...Despite relying heavily on foreign aid, Bhutan's provision of free universal health care a key pillar of the country's Gross National Happiness (GNH) philosophy proved to be its first line of defense for its Covid-19 "patient zero," alongside its commitment to regular testing for anyone who is symptomatic or has come into contact with confirmed cases" (p.1). The country's subsequent rapid mobilization was strongly

informed by science, with Prime Minister Lotay Tshering and Health Minister Dechen Wangmo both public health officials before entering politics indicating that what Bhutan is quickly learning is that while globalization and science are to be embraced, it should also look to its heritage to survive in troubling times". UNDP (2020) in Bhutan in assessing socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 on Bhutan's tourism sector has stated, "that this pandemic is not just a health crisis but also a development emergency causing tremendous social and economic impacts and impacting the livelihood of many Bhutanese." Tshering Pelden (2020) writes, "Druk Gyalpo's Relief Kidu came to the rescue of those who lost their livelihoods and jobs." Richard Seifman (2020) attributes Bhutan's Covid-19 success story due to the two-fold action of timely implementing MMR strategy and recognizing the interface between human-animal environmental health.

Zakaria (CNN) examined how Bhutan was able to fight the pandemic. To quote:

The tiny Kingdom of Bhutan settled in the Himalayan Mountains between India and Tibet is known for its emphasis on gross national happiness over gross domestic product. It has been one of the most successful countries in combating Covid-19. Perhaps, it is time for us to learn from countries like Bhutan, to promote trust in government, to focus on communication with the public to take care of our whole society by providing better social and economic support to work on preparedness and prevention in public health and to address this crisis as a unified nation.

According to Helliwell et al. (2020), COVID-19 has hit all the three main pillars of happier lives - physical and mental health, jobs and incomes, and a supportive social structure and this have been called the well-being focus. The global crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic may prompt fresh strategies. Undeniably, there is a global consensus that all sectors worldwide, including education, have been devastated by the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and that as we approach the new normal in the post-COVID-19 era, there is a need to consider education anew in the light of emerging opportunities and challenges (Cahapay, 2020).

The former Bhutanese Education Minister, Powdyel in an interview (Path-breaking DEC Life Education Founders and my gracious hosts, Ms. Natalia Tarchenko and Mr. Oleksandr Tarchenko, Kiev: Facebook February 9, 2021) assert, "Education must be powerful, purposeful, and deeply fulfilling and it must lead the society. Today's education is highly segmented, exclusionary, and materialistic and does not lift the mind and expand the heart. Education ought to celebrate the sacredness of life; it must honor the integrity of the learners and prepare them for life and not just for careers". Schlechty (1990) purports that purpose shapes vision and vision, in turn, shapes purpose and that any reasonable effort to restructure schools must begin with a serious consideration of the purposes of education. In the words of John Dewey (1916) cited in Kinney, 1989, p.1), "Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself. The process of educational transformation, like any other reform, must continue. It is not the strongest species that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the ones most responsive to

change” (Darwin, 1987 cited in Salmi, 2001, p.105). Rotherham and Willingham (2009) assert that the 21st-century skills movement will require keen attention to curriculum, teacher quality, and assessment in that, “...Educators and policymakers must ensure that content is not short-changed for an ephemeral pursuit of skills. Skills and knowledge are intertwined” (p.18). The former Bhutanese Education Minister of the Peoples’ Democratic Party (2013 -2018), Norbu Wangchuk stated, “Our education system can be nurtured to be the finest in the world. We have the Royal Vision. We have committed teachers. We have a caring society.”

Conclusion

Bhutan’s former Education Minister (2008 - 2013) Thakur S. Powdyel has highlighted the sacredness and significance of the Royal Kashos as:

The Royal Kashos are signed and sealed in a calendar- time but they are meant for all times given their scope and significance. If we miss the light and squander the opportunity, our undoing will not have been for want of vision and direction from the sacred Sethi, but for our own denial of a role in this all-embracing national effort. May the golden words of the Royal Kashos be imprinted in our hearts and lead us to action dedicated to the building of Bhutan as envisioned by our beloved King.

Thus, the ROYAL VISION must be upheld and fulfilled. *Number one on His Majesty’s priority list is education* (Ministry of Education, 2014). 21st century education is about equipping students with the skills they need to succeed and helping them grow the confidence to practice those skills (Khrapov & Loginova, 2020; Schleicher, 2012). Teaching in this century is an altogether new phenomenon and a teacher’s role in the 21st century has significantly changed from that of being a pedagogue to that of a facilitator (Kennedy et al., 2015; Campus, n.d). In this century teachers need to be forward-thinking, and they must be learners as well - learning new ways of teaching and learning alongside their students and ensuring that the curriculum is relevant to students and teachers, one that prepares our youth for their future careers and that any educational reform must ensure that the curriculum is relevant to students and teachers and prepare our youth for their future career.

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