TRADITION, MODERNISATION, AND EDUCATION REFORM IN BHUTAN: IRREDUCIBLE TENSIONS?

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Chelsea Robles
Linacre College

Supervisors: Dr. David Johnson and Dr. Ann Childs

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Abstract

This exploratory study examines the modernisation of the education system in Bhutan. It focuses on three key dimensions of the modernisation process. The first dimension concerns the debates and discussions surrounding the question of modernisation. As is to be expected, there are strongly held views that modernisation is a ‘good’ thing for Bhutan; however, conversely, there exist equipotent views that traditional culture may erode in the quest for modernisation. The study seeks to tease out these contestations through the examination of available text, including oral texts such as radio discussions, written policy documents, newspaper articles, and conversations. The second key dimension of this study examines the translation of decisions from the aforementioned debate – it is significant that modernisation policies have already been shaped though the debate is ongoing – into the delivery of education. Thus, the study focuses both on curriculum policy as well as pedagogic strategies. Finally, the third key dimension focuses on the role of the teacher as a mediator. Here, the inquiry focuses on how teachers manage the tensions.

The primary purpose of this research is to contribute to our understanding of changes in Bhutan’s education policy and curriculum (1990-2010), which charge the education sector with supporting the continuity of tradition and mediating the tension between tradition and modernisation. There is a growing body of literature that examines Bhutanese discourses on tradition, culture, and modernisation of Bhutan’s education sector (see Phuntsho, 2000; Roder, 2012; Ueda, 2003; Wangyal, 2001; Whitecross, 2002). However, despite the comprehensive education reforms currently underway which position teachers at the centre of a number of initiatives (VanBalkom & Sherman, 2010), a gap exists in available studies that bring the voices of teachers to the fore. Given that teachers occupy a central role in the education system and that the implementation of curriculum innovations succeed ‘only when the teachers concerned are committed to them and especially, when they understand as well as accept, their underlying principles,’ (Kelly, 2009:15) this study is an exploration of interplay between policy and practice and considers teachers as the focal point.

This research was conducted in 2010 and 2011 in the Thimphu and Paro dzongkhags. It included semi-structured interviews with 9 prominent policy makers and politicians, 11 education leaders, and 51 middle secondary school teachers, 7 of which were observed. More specifically, this study tells the stories of individuals who were involved in the modernisation of the national system of education from its inception in the 1960s and uncovers the experiences of a younger generation of educators.

Overall, the findings of this study reveal that in Bhutan, traditional and modern epistemologies are strong currents that converge and intermingle. However, at particular points of intersection, they flow in two competing directions. Education stakeholders are thus positioned at a critical juncture where different knowledge ‘flows’ (Appadurai, 1996) converge and diverge, generating fracture lines and, at times, hindering the possibility of balance. The participants in this study revealed a range of complex and contradictory voices as many attempted to reconcile the evident tensions.

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