

Education Minister's interview with Bhutan Times on the quality of education: For Information and Discussion



>> Lyonpo Thinley Gyamtsho

Recently, the quality of education has come under the microscope of public opinion. The minister of education, Lyonpo Thinley Gyamtsho, elaborates on all issues pertaining to education in Bhutan.

Q. Deteriorating quality of education has emerged as today's major issue of concern. What is your opinion?

A. Since the first discussions in the National Assembly in June, 2006, there have been many researches, reviews and debates on the quality of our education. Based on these exercises, we conclude that the quality of our education after all is not too bad. Apart from the English language skills which are indeed a concern, there is no noticeable decline in the standards of learning in other subjects. In fact, there is appreciable improvement in subjects like Dzongkha, Economics, History, Geography and the Wholesome Education. It must be noted that quality of education is a subjective issue and other than the examinations and result-based procedures, there is no internationally accepted formula to measure it. The results of our examinations, particularly the Board Examinations in Class VI, VIII, X and XII, indicate that our quality of education is improving slowly but steadily. Besides, both

our Class X and XII examinations are now recognized and accredited internationally. Also, thousands of Bhutanese students who study abroad do very well in whichever country they study and return successfully.

Both these facts reflect positively on the quality of our education. Moreover, quality of Bhutanese education is already better than most of the government schools in the neighboring countries. However, we agree that our quality may not be up to the mark of some of the more renowned private missionary schools in Kalimpong and Darjeeling with whom our schools are often compared with. Also, our education is far below those of some of the developed countries with whom we have many educational linkages such as, Switzerland, Denmark, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, etc. Therefore, in our quest for providing the best quality education to our children, our goals are to achieve in the immediate future the quality of education comparable at least to those of the renowned private missionary schools in the neighboring region and eventually to those of the developed countries.

Q. Was introducing NAPE a debacle in the reform of the Bhutanese education system?

A. In our eagerness to reform and improve the quality of education, a new curriculum called the New Approach to Primary Education (NAPE) was tried in the 1990s. After introducing it on experiment basis for a few years in the lower primary classes, NAPE was abandoned since our teachers had difficulties in coping with it. However, one positive result of the NAPE was that it helped our primary curriculum to break away from the old traditional education system involving basically rote learning. As a result, today we are following a curriculum which is more middle path, neither too modern like the NAPE system nor too orthodox involving rote learning. The new curriculum, which can now be considered truly Bhutanese, is evolving and improving all the time making our education system more relevant to our national policies and needs.

Q. The school curriculum in Bhutan is often quoted as a ‘heavy burden’ on children. Is it overloaded?

A. School curriculum and corresponding textbooks are always developed by educationists and other experts in their respective fields. Outside expertise is also sought whenever required. These experts ensure that burden of curriculum is always appropriate according to the different age groups of children and their grades. It may be noted that curriculum cannot be, at the same time, made too light as may be desired by some of our students. Otherwise, it will again affect the quality of education and in preparing our children for their adult lives.

Q. It is being said that replacing Indian teachers, or at least reducing their number, has a direct connection to the poor quality of education. Is that true and why?

A. We still have in our education system a large number of Indian teachers and we are still recruiting every year many new Indian teachers particularly in the fields of Mathematics and Sciences. We expect Indian teachers to continue serving in our education system for

many more years particularly at the High School and tertiary levels. However, we must ask ourselves how long can we rely on others to continue to help us particularly in a core sector like education? Isn't 'self-reliance' one of our main national policy goals since His Majesty's enthronement in 1974? We must have more confidence on our own teachers who are in general very good, just like we must have confidence on our children for the future of Bhutan.

Q. Many Bhutanese teachers, both at primary and tertiary level, seem unhappy about their profession. What do you think is de-motivating them?

A. There are 6,094 teachers serving our education system which constitute one third of the total civil service. In a profession with such a large number there will be always a few who are disenchanted and see the grass greener on the other side of the fence.

During the last three years or so, I have visited hundreds of schools and, in addition to the students, met and talked to thousands of our teachers. Our teachers are in general very proud of their profession, are highly motivated and doing great job in educating our children. Recently, the government has approved a number of additional incentives particularly for the benefit of teachers posted in the rural areas, such as, the difficulty area allowance, better housing and communication facilities, better administrative support and school facilities, more training opportunities, timely promotions, etc. Also, the PCS provides teachers a career ladder up to BCSR Grade 3 within the Teaching Cadre itself without having to seek transfer elsewhere.

Q. Do you think the entry level for teaching should be revised to bachelor's degree and above?

A. We have already, since 2003, raised the minimum entry qualification of all the new teachers to Bachelors degree i.e. B. Ed from the two NIEs and B.A, B.Com, and B.Sc from Sherubtse and other colleges with one year's PGCE. Teachers who had joined our education system earlier without the Bachelors degree are now encouraged to complete the B.Ed through distance education and similar other programs. There are also plans of upgrading the present three-year B.Ed program to 4-year B.Ed. Honors.

Q. More and more parents today, especially from the upper strata of the society, prefer to send their children abroad for studies citing poor quality at home. What do you think of this?

A. I do not think that is true. Presently, there are 2,651 Bhutanese students studying abroad which is only 1.5% of our total student strength. Of these, 212 undergoing school education are mostly children of our diplomats and other Bhutanese working abroad. Of the 2,439 students in universities, 489 are on government scholarship studying medicine, engineering and other professional courses.

Further, the bulk of the remaining university students are those who could not be accommodated at their first choices at Sherubtse and perhaps also in other colleges inside Bhutan. Therefore, there are only a handful of Bhutanese students studying abroad meeting

your criteria. However, we welcome such initiatives from a few of our affluent parents who can afford and prefer a different and better type of education for their children. They would add up to the variety and richness of our educated population.

Q. People also agree that there is a vast difference between Sherubtse then and Sherubtse now. Do you agree?

A. Sherubtse College admits the cream of our Bhutanese youth who have been screened at Class X and again at Class XII. The environment at Sherubtse College is ideal for higher learning.

The College has the most favorable staff student ratio, and students are educated almost on tutorial rather than the usual lecture system. There is, therefore, no reason why the quality of education at Sherubtse College cannot be the best. Every year I camp for a few days at Sherubtse College closely interacting with its staff and students, the last such visit being in May earlier this year. Yes, Sherubtse College is changing and fortunately it is changing for the better. I find a lot of significant all round improvement at the College. In addition, the Royal University of Bhutan is introducing at Sherubtse the four-year double subject Honors courses which will make studies at the College even more challenging, thus further improving the quality of education and greatly enhancing the employability of the Sherubtse graduates.

Q. More and more young school leavers are finding themselves unemployable. What happens to this group of Bhutanese?

A. It is ironic that, on one hand, our own school leavers are finding themselves unemployable and, on the other hand, our farmlands in the villages are increasingly left fallow and the 2005 National Census shows that there are some 135,000 expatriates in Bhutan.

Unemployment problem in Bhutan is mainly due to the mismatch between jobs available versus the expectations of our school leavers.

During my school visits, I always counsel our students on four areas, namely: (i) they must work hard while in schools to attain the best all round education; (ii) they must take up Science which requires extra effort but carries more career prospects; (iii) all the students presently studying in our schools cannot expect to find jobs in government or even other types of white color jobs; and (iv) they must always keep open, amongst their various career options, agriculture and other opportunities in rural areas, private sector, self employment, blue color jobs and also those jobs where we have large number of expatriates.

Q. Don't you think the education system needs an urgent revamp to respond to the call and concern of the mass? What measures are you taking to do that?

A. We must remember that our modern education system began only in 1960 with 11 schools and 440 students. We have since then achieved much in the sector both in terms of number and quality. Forty six years may be very long in the life of a person but is very short in the life of an education system. In fact, we can boast of achieving in mere 46 years what some other countries have taken hundreds of years. Our education system is evolving and improving all the time and, in doing so, there would be shortcomings, hopefully not too many. Our children are the real wealth of this country and we set ourselves very high goals in trying to provide to them the best quality education.

To this end, the recent government directives issued in form of an Executive Order from the Prime Minister consist of some 88 strategies and measures towards improving the quality of education. They along with the other education policies are grouped under five broad categories, namely: (i) adequate and quality facilities, (ii) quality curriculum, (iii) wholesome education, (iv) quality teachers and (v) quality administrative support and then further broken up into short term (2006-08), medium term (2008-12) and long term (2013-20) goals. They also include several strategies to improve the English language skill which presently seems to be our weakest link. Armed properly with these strategies and measures and with some more efforts from our teachers, students and their parents, we are determined to take the quality of our education to new heights. The government has also set up an Inter Agency Commission to do a comprehensive sector review as well as monitor the effectiveness of these strategies and measures in improving the quality of our education.