Supporting students with disability in schools in Bhutan: perspectives from school principals

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ABSTRACT

Bhutanese educators are facing the challenge of implementing inclusive education for students with disability throughout their schooling system. Selected schools have started to implement inclusive policies and practices, and it is timely to investigate the progress of inclusive education in these schools. In this qualitative study, 14 Bhutanese principals responded to questions regarding inclusive practices in their schools. Responses were divided into two broad categories: the current status of inclusion in their school; and, inclusion in the future. Principals described barriers such as a lack of specialised teachers, inadequate resources and facilities, and a lack of holistic inclusion. However, they also noted that students were accepted by their peers, that the schools were working well with what they have, and that there was a positive attitude for the future. Changes that are required to progress inclusive education in Bhutan from the perspective of the principals are discussed. The findings of this research will be of interest to researchers and leaders in schools and ministries of education who are working to promote more inclusive schools in less developed countries.

KEYWORDS

Inclusive education; less developed countries; education for all

Introduction

Many countries are committed to inclusive education but there is a need in less developed countries to ensure ‘careful consideration of every aspect of schooling and the social context in which it finds itself’ (Sayed, Soudien, and Carrim 2003, 245). One country that is committed to developing an inclusive approach to schooling is Bhutan which is evident in the current policies of the Ministry of Education.

Bhutan is a small Himalayan Kingdom located between two giants: China in the north and India in the south (Chhetri 2015). It has an area of 38,394 square kilometres and a population of over 0.7 million (Sherab 2013). The size of the general education sector has seen a significant growth from barely a few schools that were focused on...
literacy and numeracy curricula to over 500 government primary and secondary schools (Chhetri 2015).

Bhutan’s education journey started with monastic education until the early 1950s when modern education was first introduced (Schuelka 2012). Today, the Bhutanese education system has three main elements, namely general, monastic, and non-formal education (Ministry of Education 2009). The Royal Government of Bhutan has been facilitating free schooling for Bhutanese children aged between 6 and 16 years and this focus on educational equity has supported Bhutan to reach gender parity in the schools (Ministry of Education 2014).

The modern education system was introduced in Bhutan about 60 years ago and inclusive education is a recent development in the country (Schuelka 2012). The establishment of Zangley Muenselling School for the Blind, the present-day Muenselling Institute of Khaling, in 1973 was the first initiative taken by the Royal Government of Bhutan to support education for vision impaired children but the actual process of integrating children into mainstream schools began only in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Chhetri 2015). Today, there is a separate division under the Department of School Education within the Ministry of Education which designs programmes and policies to support schools to become more inclusive and flexible to accommodate diverse learners, particularly those with special educational needs (Dorji and Schuelka 2016). In Bhutan, the term ‘special educational needs’ (SEN) is used to describe students with a disability. This initiative is in line with the efforts of the Royal Government of Bhutan to make education fully accessible for all, including children with physical, intellectual, and other forms of disabilities as highlighted in the Education Sector Strategy 2020 (Ministry of Education 2001). However, as outlined in the Bhutan Education Blueprint 2014–2024, the education sector has been facing numerous challenges in fully implementing inclusive education programmes in the country, mainly due to the lack of adequate resources, facilities, support services, and expertise to deal with children with special educational needs (Ministry of Education 2014).

Bhutan lacks comprehensive data on persons with disabilities, but the current research indicates that over 21.7% of children aged 2–9 years have at least one form of disability (UNICEF, Bhutan National Statistical Bureau, Bhutan Ministry of Education and Bhutan Ministry of Health 2012). It was initially estimated that people with disabilities constituted about 3.5% of Bhutan’s total population (National Statistical Bureau 2005) but the World Health Organization (2011) estimates that at least 15% of the population in less developed countries have some kind of disability. This means that over 105,000 Bhutanese could have disabilities ranging from mild to severe impairment (Chhetri 2015). However, comprehensive research needs to be carried out to validate this assumption because in Bhutan, most people think only about physically challenged people when talking about disability. Dorji (2015) found that 31% of children with disability in Bhutan belong to economically disadvantaged families. Therefore, it is important for the Royal Government of Bhutan to ensure that all children with disabilities get full access to appropriate educational and social support services regardless of their socio-economic status (Dorji and Schuelka 2016).

The educational policies of Bhutan have been significantly influenced by both Indian and western education systems (Schuelka 2012). As part of its efforts to achieve the ambitious global agenda of ensuring universal access to education, Bhutan has been a signatory
to major initiatives of the United Nations such as the Education for All (EFA) conference in Jomtien and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Dorji and Schuelka 2016). The Royal Government of Bhutan continues to work towards promoting inclusive practices within the education system so that every child, regardless of whether he/she is disabled, gets the same opportunity to go to school (Ninnes et al. 2007).

In line with the international commitments for a global vision for all, Bhutan has also been incorporating its own unique strategies and approaches to modernise and develop the education system. Since the mid-1990s, the concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH) has become central to Bhutan’s educational strategies and policies, as the government started to see the socio-economic progress of the country based on the level of happiness each of its citizens enjoys, not based on how much goods and services it produces (Royal Government of Bhutan 1999). Denman and Namgyel (2008) add that in order to harmonise every development with GNH values, it is a requirement that all educational policies must be screened through the Gross National Happiness Commission before being implemented.

Moving away from the traditional education system, Bhutan has come a long way defining and re-defining its educational policies and strategies. The introduction of more flexible and modern academic curricula has created an education system which is more appropriate and acceptable to the daily lives of the general Bhutanese population. Chhoeda (2007) suggests that localisation of contexts and community participation in Bhutanese curriculum has significantly facilitated the delivery of culturally and socially appropriate contents and value systems in the education programme. One unique feature of the Bhutanese education system is that it is not merely focused on the acquisition of skills that benefit the Bhutanese economy. Bhutan has managed to integrate the academic demands of a modern education system with the socio-cultural traditions of its citizenry, although there are still some differences between the traditional monastic educational system and the modern educational system (Denman and Namgyel 2008; Phuntsho 2000).

**Inclusive and special schools in Bhutan**

Bhutan’s Ministry of Education supported 12 mainstream schools to develop an inclusive approach for students with SEN, and two special schools that provide education for students with a disability (Kuensel Corporation 2018), and these 14 school principals participated in the study reported in this article. In April 2018, there were 14 schools with a SEN programme. The following section will describe how the 12 mainstream schools support an inclusive approach to students with SEN and how the two special schools support a transition of inclusion for their students with SEN.

The 12 mainstream schools with SEN programmes are described in Bhutan as inclusive schools and support the educational needs of both children with and without disabilities in the same learning environment. As part of the SEN programmes, there are some additional adjustments such as ‘pull-out’ and ‘push-in’ classes for children with disabilities to help them with their learning. ‘Pull-out’ refers to the arrangement in which students with mild to moderate learning difficulties are released from the mainstream class to the SEN room for additional small group learning based upon their individual needs. In the ‘pull-out’ classes, students receive three hours per week of additional individualised
support and the group should not exceed five students. ‘Push-in’ classes refer to an arrangement in which the SEN teacher pushes into the mainstream educational class to provide more in-depth accommodations and smaller group support in the subject areas where the students demonstrate needs. Furthermore, the Early Childhood Care and Special Educational Needs Division of the Department of School Education, Ministry of Education is currently working with the Royal Education Council to develop more inclusive school curricula so that children with disabilities can participate equally in the classroom like their non-disabled peers. Schools with SEN programmes have some flexibility in the curriculum, assessment, and co-curricular activities for children with disabilities. For example, the school curriculum for children with disabilities is usually tailored to meet specific learning needs.

In Bhutan, special schools are segregated schools for students with disabilities such as hearing and vision impairment. The schools support transition to other relevant institutions for training or employment on a needs basis. There are two such schools in Bhutan: one which has students with vision impairment studying until Grade 6, and one for students with hearing impairment studying until 10th grade. These special schools continue to provide technical and professional support to their students pursuing inclusive higher studies or training after they graduate from the special schools. Apart from regular teaching and learning processes, these schools also focus on skills development and empowerment programmes to help students successfully transition into schools/institutes in the future. Some of such programmes include Activities for Daily Living, basic vocational training, gardening, cooking, and music. These learning programmes support the students to be included in a range of higher education and training environments. The special schools are expected to support transition into more inclusive environments.

**Current policy and initiatives**

The Education Review Strategy, Realizing Vision 2020 (Ministry of Education 2001), delineates that children with disabilities and special needs will be able to access and benefit from education. It is clear in this document that inclusive education is very much an area of concern and the Ministry is working hard to ensure universal education and equal access to education (Schuelka 2012). It is estimated that about 10–12% of Bhutanese children do not get the opportunity to go to school either due to a disability or poverty (Royal Government of Bhutan 2009).

The need for promoting inclusive education continues as a priority which is evident in the 9th, 10th, 11th, and 12th Five-Year Plans and the policies of the Ministry of Education. In the 9th Five-Year Plan document, establishing a programme of inclusive education is one of the key objectives under the education sector plan, with the aim of ‘establishing a programme of inclusive education for children who are physically and mentally challenged’ (Royal Government of Bhutan 2002, 69). In terms of infrastructure, in the plan period, the Special Education Unit has been established under the Department of School Education. The focus is on supporting education for students with SEN.

Emphasis on inclusive education is further expanded in the 10th Five-Year Plan where inclusive education programmes are planned in all schools to improve access and quality of education. The Curriculum and Professional Support Division under the Ministry of
Education was entrusted with the responsibility to coordinate and implement inclusive education. Unlike the former Five-Year Plan, special education programmes have been included as separate programmes under the education sector in the 10th Five-Year Plan, with the objective to provide enhanced special education services to children with a wide range of disabilities by providing support facilities in selected schools across the country. The 10th Plan supported the development of additional physical facilities in the existing schools, and established an additional five more special education centres in mainstream schools.

In the 11th Plan, emphasis on inclusive education has been further reinforced, with the word ‘inclusive’ being included in almost every sector such as economy, health, and social development. The 11th plan objective is to achieve ‘Self Reliance and Inclusive Green Socio-Economic Development’ (Royal Government of Bhutan 2013). The Annual Education Statistics (AES) 2012 reported only 343 students and 177 teachers in eight schools with SEN programmes at the end of the 10th Plan (Royal Government of Bhutan 2009, 224); however, towards the end of the 11th Plan, the AES 2017 saw an increase in schools to 14 plus two special schools with 502 children and 481 teachers (Ministry of Education 2017). To provide a more inclusive approach to education for students with special needs across the country, the Ministry of Education developed inclusive education standards in 2016 focusing on three dimensions: inclusive culture, inclusive policy, and inclusive practice (Gross National Happiness Commission 2018).

Going forward, inclusive education will get greater attention in the 12th Five-Year Plan under the national key result area titled ‘Quality of education and skills improved’. While still in the draft stage, the National Education Policy developed by Ministry of Education (2018) includes the following provisions of inclusive education:

- Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) centres must address the needs of all 36–71-month-old children and be inclusive of gender, disabilities, socioeconomic backgrounds, or location;
- The curriculum and pedagogy shall be inclusive of gender, special educational needs, socio-economic circumstances, and geographic location;
- Sufficient additional professionals shall be made available to provide effective and inclusive special education services;
- Resource allocation will consider education policy priorities such as early childhood care and development, primary education, inclusive education, gender, special educational needs, schools in diverse geographic locations, schools that service socio-economically disadvantaged communities, emergency contingency funding, tertiary education, research and development;
- Have a special educational needs resource team to support schools to be inclusive and to provide special education services; and
- Schools shall have an inclusive disaster management and preparedness plan.

Although there is still a gap between inclusive education and practice and the material, curricular, and personnel capacity to implement the policy, Dorji (2003) agrees that Bhutanese culture already promotes values necessary for an inclusive approach to education. Both Dorji (2003) and Namgyel (2011) view this approach as ‘wholesome education’, contributing to the overall development of a child.
In the modern education system, one of the biggest challenges faced by educators and policy-makers is to support the varying needs of children in schools. While the monastic educational system in Bhutan had only to select those children who were naturally inclined towards spiritual practice, the modern educational system brings a heterogeneous group of children together in one classroom with one teacher with the hope that they will all learn together (Schuelka 2012). Just as in the development of other educational systems, providing compulsory education for all brings the confusion of how to educate children with differing abilities effectively and efficiently with limited resources available (Schuelka and Johnstone 2012). In order to address these concerns, there has been increased enthusiasm and interest within the Ministry of Education to streamline and strengthen its special and inclusive education programmes in the schools over the years (Schuelka 2012).

The institutionalisation of inclusive education policy into the educational structure of Bhutan represents continued commitment of the government towards building an inclusive society. As cited by both Dorji (2003) and Namgyel (2011), the Bhutanese education system is deeply influenced by Buddhist cultural values and principles. The belief in the inter-connectedness of all beings naturally contributes to developing and expressing policies that support inclusiveness (Schuelka 2012). Although the belief in karmic actions might pose some challenges in conceptualising the needs and concerns of persons with disabilities, the GNH-based policies and strategies are largely designed to recognise and promote inclusive practices both within the education sector and in the society at large (Schuelka 2012). Most of the major policy documents of the Ministry of Education and the Royal Government of Bhutan comprise provisions that ensure all persons with disabilities get the opportunity to meaningfully participate in all aspects of public life, be it in education, health, or politics. The National Disability Policy of Bhutan is being currently developed by the Gross National Happiness Commission and once it is in place, it is expected to guide all the plans and policies of the government to ensure that all persons with disabilities get equal access to all public services and opportunities.

Further challenges to inclusive education in Bhutan

Schools in Bhutan consist of overcrowded classrooms, rigid curricula, and lack basic facilities, learning resources, and professional development opportunities (Center for Educational Research and Development 2009). Teachers mostly prepare their own teaching and learning materials and find the relevant resources. They have to handle classrooms that often have more than 35 students including those with special needs with little or no support from specialist staff. Many schools lack infrastructure and an accessible environment to cater for children with disabilities. There is a lack of ramps, extra classrooms for individual support lessons, and basic learning materials such as books, computers, and printers (Dorji and Schuelka 2016). The pre-service teachers are trained in the Samtse College of Education and Paro College of Education, the two national training institutes for school teachers in Bhutan. These Colleges of Education have modules on special education (Kamenopoulou and Dukpa 2017), but these modules are offered as electives and are not compulsory.

The lack of selection criteria for the placement of principals in schools with SEN programmes could be another factor affecting Bhutan’s efforts to streamline and
strengthen inclusive practices in schools. As of now, the Ministry of Education follows the same selection process for the placement of principals regardless of what types of schools they are going to be placed in. As a result, the school leaders may not be prepared to take up additional responsibilities of providing appropriate support for children with disabilities and teachers working with them. The Special Education Division, however, provides basic orientation and induction programmes for newly placed principals to familiarise them with the needs and rights of children with disabilities and how they should provide necessary support by creating opportunities and enabling conditions for them to cope with studies alongside their non-disabled peers. The school principals are also often invited to attend capacity building training programmes the Division organises for SEN teachers. Apart from such opportunities, there have been no specialised professional development programmes for the principals of schools with SEN programmes.

Despite all the above challenges, SEN programmes have been introduced in selected schools over a decade and it is therefore time to find out about the implementation of inclusion in these schools. Therefore, this research is intended to investigate the views of school principals about the impact of an inclusive approach on students, teachers, school curriculum, and resources in Bhutan. The research team was interested in what is working well in schools and what are the key challenges that need to be addressed in the future.

**Methodology**

This research utilises ‘insider research’ (Atkins and Wallace 2012) with five members of the research team working as ‘researching professionals’ (Wellington and Sikes 2006, 725) in the Ministry of Education, Bhutan. The team of researchers was interested to conduct research in their own country after engaging in an Australian Aid supported short course where they were studying inclusive education. There are a range of benefits of undertaking research as an insider such as having ease of access to a group of participants and having the opportunity to make a difference in the researchers’ setting. However, there are also complex issues in regard to being objective in the data analysis, ‘since an insider will naturally be subjective about the organisation and the focus of the study’ (Atkins and Wallace 2012, 48). The issue of subjectivity was addressed by broadening the research team to include two research colleagues from an Australian university who have a history of supporting the development of inclusive education in Bhutan. The Australian authors on this project worked alongside the team from Bhutan, leading the data analysis and hosting meetings using online technology to discuss the coding of the data as it emerged, and therefore the team was able to balance the insider bias that can be a difficulty with insider research.

A survey approach was used to gather data to investigate the views of school principals about the impact of an inclusive approach on students, teachers, school curriculum, and resources in Bhutan. Survey methods can include interviews in person or over the phone and administering a questionnaire to participants that could be via an email (Ravitch and Mittenfelner Carl 2016). This method was cost and resource effective because the researching professionals wanted to collect data from school principals from a range of locations in Bhutan.
Participants

At the time of data collection, the principals of the 12 schools with SEN programmes and the two special schools were selected to participate in the research study. All schools were involved in a range of education programmes to promote inclusion as described in the earlier section of this article. The 14 principals worked as leaders in schools that varied in size from 35 students (a special school) to large schools that had approximately 1675 students. The participating schools were identified between 2003 and 2016. The percentage of students with disabilities varies from 2% through to 100% at the two special schools. The questionnaires were distributed to the 14 principals via email and in person. Table 1 provides further information about the 14 participating schools.

Data collection

The researching professionals met with one of the Australian researchers in Bhutan and developed the self-administered structured questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed to gather the views of the principals about the impact of an inclusive approach on students, teachers, school curriculum, and resources in Bhutan. The questionnaire was developed in the English language as this is the language of education in Bhutan. The questionnaire has

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School ID</th>
<th>Type/locality</th>
<th>Total number of students in school</th>
<th>Number of students with special needs</th>
<th>Percentage of students with special needs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Middle secondary school – urban</td>
<td>859</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>8.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Central school – remote</td>
<td>703</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Lower secondary school – remote</td>
<td>1675</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Central school – remote</td>
<td>785</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Lower secondary school – remote</td>
<td>192</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Central school – remote</td>
<td>912</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Central school (middle campus) – remote</td>
<td>314</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>12.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Lower secondary school – remote</td>
<td>819</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Institute for blind and visually impaired students – remote</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Central school – remote</td>
<td>1643</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Central school – remote</td>
<td>659</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Central school – remote</td>
<td>401</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Institute for deaf students – urban</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Central school – remote</td>
<td>364</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Middle secondary schools have students from grade PP (pre-primary) to grade 10. Lower secondary schools have students from grade PP to grade 8.

The term ‘Central Schools’ refers to those schools that are centrally located in large population catchment areas with residential facilities for 80% of students and day-school facilities for 20% of students. The basic target is to have grades from PP till 10 or 12 with a minimum of 800 numbers of students being enrolled per school. Some current facilities that have been provided are free school uniforms, sports wear, bedding, and mid-day meal for day scholars. The core intention of the government to start central schools is to provide quality education to students in an integrated, centrally located autonomous boarding school. Under this reform, many Primary, Secondary, Middle-Secondary, and Higher Secondary Schools within the same local area have been merged to form one Central School.
two sections. The first part of the questionnaire requires general information about the school and the second part of the questionnaire requested the school principals to answer 12 questions (see Appendix 1). Since the identified schools are spread across the country, email was chosen as the most convenient medium of distributing the questionnaire to the respondents, especially considering the limited time and resources in Bhutan. Two principals received the questionnaire in person as they were based in the local area. The email addresses of the principals were obtained through the coordinators of SEN programmes in the schools. Telephone communication was used for further clarification and necessary follow-up. The responses received from the participants were consolidated for analysis and emailed to the researchers in Australia.

Ethical consent issues were addressed in Bhutan. All of the invited participants in the study were from schools in the Department of School Education of the Ministry of Education, and written approval was obtained from the Director General of the Department of School Education for the research study. The questionnaire was distributed to all participants along with the approval letter from the Ministry of Education. The completion of the questionnaire indicated consent and all completed questionnaire data were de-identified in Australia for analysis.

Data analysis

Questionnaire data from the 14 participants were de-identified and transferred into NVivo (QSR International 2014) as Word documents. Initial coding was performed by a member of the research team. Terms and phrases with similar meaning were identified (Mayring 2000) and coded within NVivo ‘nodes’. Once the initial coding was done, two members of the research team further analysed the data, discussing the groupings and meanings of the data, and making changes as required. The process of data analysis can be described as six broad stages: Step 1: Immersion where the researchers get an overall sense of the data; Step 2: Reflection where the Australian researchers reflected what they were seeing and then discussing and reflecting with the team from Bhutan – this was an important stage of the process as the cultural and spiritual context of Bhutan needed to be considered; Step 3: Analysis where the data was broken down into parts; Step 4: Synthesis where the researchers search for patterns and ideas; Step 5: Location and Relation where the data is considered within the context of the research which is the history and policy/practice of education in Bhutan; and Step 6: Presentation which is where data are selected as evidence for the coding (Wellington 2000, 135–139). The categories and sub-categories were discussed with the research team via online technology and via email copies of data coding taken from NVivo. As data analysis progressed, the final coding was reviewed by all members of the research team and exemplars for each category were identified.

Results

Qualitative data collected in the questionnaire were analysed to provide the groups’ perception or understanding of an issue; in this case, the views of school principals about the impact of an inclusive approach on students, teachers, school curriculum, and resources in Bhutan. Analysis of the data from the 14 principals revealed two broad categories: the
current situation, and inclusion in the future. Results relating to the current status of
inclusion in Bhutan were further broken down as follows:

(1) What is working well:
   a. Accommodations and teaching strategies
   b. Stakeholder satisfaction
   c. Working with what we have
   d. Integration and acceptance with peers
   e. Positive attitude for the future
(2) What is not working well:
   a. Parental support
   b. Lack of specialised teaching staff
   c. Classroom issues
   d. Resources and facilities
   e. Lack of holistic inclusion

Participant responses related to inclusion in the future focused on what changes need to be
made to ensure the successful implementation of inclusive practices in the future. These
data were categorised into the following groups:

(1) Curriculum and pedagogy
(2) Teachers and teacher training
(3) Resources and facilities
(4) Acceptance and support
(5) Research and policy
(6) Funding

The data gathered from the 14 school principals are presented verbatim with an indication
of the identifying number for the participant. The analysed data are interpreted within the
context of Bhutan (Step 5: Location and Relation) to inform a discussion about their views
about the impact of an inclusive approach on students, teachers, school curriculum, and
resources in Bhutan. The research team has interrogated the data to identify categories and
sub-categories of data that inform a discussion about the current situation, and inclusion
in the future. We have selected data (Step 6: Presentation) that provides evidence of each
category and sub-category. The first category is about the principals’ views about the
current situation in Bhutan.

**Inclusion in Bhutan – current**

The principals spoke of a range of areas of school implementation of inclusive education
that are going well.

1. **What is working well**
   1a. **Accommodations and teaching strategies.** Principals indicated that a variety of accom-
modations were afforded to students to enable them to participate in the classroom. These
accommodations included adjustments and differentiated pedagogy. These current
approaches to teaching indicate how teachers are developing culturally and socially appropriate teaching methods to meet the needs of the students in their own country (Chhoeda 2007). For example:

Our school helps children with special needs more in academic than social. For academic there are number of remediation including differentiated lesson plans. (Principal 4)

I think what is possible is rendered both in academic and social services: Push-in classes tried, customized question papers, separate exam room sorted, extra time provided and questions explained. (Principal 6)

It seems that teachers are developing their own models of practice to support the needs of students in the school, where there is no access to teacher assistants for example and the class sizes are large (usually at least 35 students). Teachers are making adjustments to assessment tasks: ‘… we provide them with extra time to write any test and most of their test are guided’ (Principal 14).

According to the principals, the inclusion of students with diverse needs in the classroom provided an opportunity for teachers to expand their teaching pedagogy and skills:

Teachers get opportunity to deal with diverse students, thus enabling them [to] acquire different strategies and skills. (Principal 10)

This is very challenging due to the overcrowded classrooms, rigid curriculum and examinations, and lack of resources. However, teachers are learning how to support students’ diverse needs and are supported by the Ministry of Education (Schuelka 2012). This principal’s comment indicates that teachers are trying to ensure a universal education and equal access to education:

Inclusion is working well in this school. Teachers are taking extra initiatives to support students with disability beside fully engaged in regular teaching programme. (Principal 12)

These principals describe examples of how teachers in their schools are working to create enabling conditions for children with disabilities to go to school as outlined in the 9th Five-Year Plan (Royal Government of Bhutan 2002). As researchers have indicated, the teachers are working in schools that lack basic learning materials such as books, computers, and printers (Dorji and Schuelka 2016), so this commitment to taking extra initiative is well respected by the principals.

1b. Stakeholder satisfaction. Many comments from the principals indicated that there was a sense of satisfaction from all stakeholder groups on current inclusion practices. Principal 10 commented:

Students with disability are happy in the school. Parents and stakeholders are satisfied. SEN program in the school progressing well. Able to transit students [to vocational institutes or higher studies].

As indicated earlier by Dorji (2003), the culture in Bhutan promotes the values necessary for inclusive education and it seems that teachers, students, parents, and stakeholders have a positive mindset in some schools. Chhoeda (2007) indicated that Bhutanese culture and GNH impact the value systems in the education programmes and we suggest that this would also impact community satisfaction and value for inclusive education.
Students were believed to feel ‘secure, satisfied … included, accepted in society’ (Principal 10). The following comment from Principal 14 indicated a positive change in the following young girl’s life:

I think they are happy, I say this because my children with some disabilities enjoy coming to school and likes to be among other friends. This year I admitted a student in pre-primary class. She was 12 years old. She has intellectual disability. After enrolling her in the school, we could see lots of difference in her life.

Principal 2 noted that children ‘feel happy to be in the school, less absenteeism, co-operation, willingness to adapt to the situation’. It was also noted that children with disabilities are ‘happy in their classes to be with their peers because they support each other’ (Principal 13), and that ‘few are very severe yet they love being a part of school’ (Principal 3). The following quote from Principal 7 highlights a focus on supporting diversity:

I think, the parents of these students feel more secure to have their children in normal setting. For example, these children will have friends who are normal and can help them in any situations.

The research team has supported the Ministry of Bhutan for the last decade in creating enabling conditions for children with disabilities to go to school with their peers. This support has included developing inclusive language that supports the vision of inclusion in Bhutan. Programmes such as Australian Aid short courses can support the critical reflection of how language that reflects a medical perspective of disability (who is normal and who is not normal) can be a barrier to developing more inclusive education. This is challenging in the Bhutanese context with the belief in karmic actions that might pose some challenges in conceptualising the needs of people with disabilities. Culturally, the conceptualisation of ‘disability’ in Bhutan has been a recognition of human difference based on Buddhism (Schuelka 2015). There are cultural challenges in regard to acceptance of difference such as the belief in karma and the idea of bodily wholeness.

The following comment from Principal 3 also indicates that teachers are grappling with the medical model of disability with this focus on caring for children rather than on having high expectations and educating children:

There are many indicators where children having various problems are now taken cared, enrolled in school and enjoying at par with rest of the children.

This is an issue that is a challenge in Bhutan as in other countries that have a focus on student performance. Inclusionists would argue that students with disabilities have the right to be educated with their regular peers, whilst others would argue that this should not be at the expense of receiving a quality and appropriate education supported by adequate resourcing and staffing, which is often not available in Bhutan.

Principals commented on the satisfaction felt by parents of children with disabilities, using terms such as ‘trust’, ‘secure’, ‘positive’, and ‘happy’. Principal 14 made the following comment:

I think they [parents] are grateful because the institutions like schools are accepting their children with different abilities. They think that government is helping them.

Singal et al. (2013) suggested that disability is mostly associated with poverty and this is regardless of the geographical location of the country. However, the rugged terrain of
the Himalayan Mountains combined with the lack of roads and resources must exacerbate the challenge for families in accessing education. This quote below indicates how grateful the parent was to have their child attend school and the hardship involved of travelling to school:

The parents knew their child is disable feel relieve to have their child in an inclusive classroom. They feel there is a way out for their child. A parent of a child with special need brought her child to our school as soon as she heard that our school is an inclusive school. She walked a day along with the child to get him admitted. (Principal 4)

1c. Working with what we have. Despite the many challenges facing the implementation of inclusive practices in Bhutan, the principals indicated that they were managing within the parameters of what they had, as reflected in the following comments:

We are giving our best to accommodate all sort of children till date. Whatever little experience we have are made best use with the help and support of various stake holders. (Principal 3)

… our school caters to the need of the differently abled student with the resources available in our own vicinity and I have students who are different able. (Principal 14)

1d. Integration and acceptance with peers. Principals indicated that the integration and acceptance of students with disabilities was working well within their schools, with Principal 13 stating, ‘Acceptance by students and teachers is growing and people support each other’. Principal 7 indicated:

He or she gets equal opportunity to participate in any activity in normal setting which leads to boosting moral, confidence and self-esteem.

Principals also mentioned the use of a ‘peer’ system, which was working well within their schools:

we also have peer buddy club which helps the students to learn through playing games and solving puzzles. Socially, we make them participate in all the activities in and outside the school. (Principal 14)

In social services, peer buddies developed, clubs like peer helpers and care giving established. (Principal 6)

In the classroom setting, they get help from their friends and even teachers give extra attention to them. (Principal 7)

Students felt ‘accepted in the inclusive setting’ (Principal 2) and ‘the whole school accepts them as any other children in the school’ (Principal 2). In the following comment, Principal 9 indicates the value of the child with disabilities attending an inclusive setting:

I personally feel that they [students] must have mixed sorts of feeling. Insecure on one hand and may be have the sense of competency as they have general peers learning with them.

It is pleasing to see the positive responses from the principals. The Ministry of Education follows the same selection processes for principals for schools that are working towards
inclusion and these school leaders have to be prepared for the additional responsibilities of providing leadership and support. The Special Education Division provides additional support and training for the leaders of the schools that are supporting students with disabilities.

1e. Positive attitude for the future. Overall, the principals expressed a positive attitude towards the inclusion of students with disabilities in their schools, both in the current environment and in the long term:

At this juncture, we can’t tell about the success as our school is newly selected and it is in the process of implementation. One day we expect the great outcome of it. (Principal 11)

We have instituted in the school and yes, definitely it will help every child academically and socially in an inclusive environment in our school in short term as well as in long run. (Principal 11)

Facilities are also improving. A separate structure is underway to facilities this school in enhance inclusive education. (Principal 12)

2. What is not working well
2a. Parental support. Despite indicating a sense of parental satisfaction above, there was also mention of a lack of parental support by some principals. This was due either to the parents being uneducated or illiterate, or to issues with acceptance of their child’s disability:

It is very discouraging particularly with illiterate parents as they don’t accept that easily. Once a child was taken for a pull-out session in the SEN room where a parent came and charged to a teacher why her child is taken to disable room. (Principal 3)

On the other hand it’s difficult for a parent to agree that their child has some sort of disability. The parent hardly cooperates with the school then making it difficult for the school to do any intervention. (Principal 4)

This also relates to the cultural issues that have been discussed previously in relation to karma and acceptance of people with a disability. This is an important area for the school leadership and requires sensitive support for families and the community to move the holistic and inclusive policy and practice forward in Bhutan.

2b. Lack of specialised teaching staff. Principals discussed issues around a shortage of specialised teaching staff to support children with specific disabilities. A number of principals made comments such as this: ‘Teachers have minimal ideas to intervene for all kinds of disabilities’ (Principal 4).

More recently teacher training in Bhutan has incorporated courses and programmes that will have a positive influence on inclusive education in the future (Kamenopoulou and Dukpa 2017).

2c. Classroom issues. Principals indicated a variety of issues related to having students with disabilities in the classroom. One issue was that of having students with a large range of
abilities and disabilities, which Principal 1 described as a 'big challenge'. Keeping all students engaged becomes difficult for teachers in this situation:

It becomes hard for me to express their feelings. Superficially I could see them participating equally with some modifications and accommodations. Yet if remains quite undiscovered. For example, we have one student who is having developmental delay with cognition deficiency and poor motor skills for her/his class many teachers feel that it is quite challenging to keep him/her engaged. (Principal 8)

Large class sizes were also noted as a problem for the management of an inclusive classroom:

Sometime we feel handicapped in rendering our helping hand to those needy once in a large number of student in the class. (Principal 8)

It is very skeptic [sic] to share as we have one of the highest enrolment and none of the classes are less than 40. (Principal 3)

In Bhutan, the class size depends largely on the location of the schools. It is usually large (40 plus) in urban areas and smaller in rural areas. The Bhutan Education Blueprint 2014–2024 has recommended an ideal class size as 24 for primary schools and 30 for secondary schools, but it is an ongoing challenge to meet these targets.

2d. Resources and facilities. A lack of appropriate resources and facilities was a challenge in the schools. As mentioned by Principal 4, ‘There is no access to children with special needs in terms of infrastructure’ such as ramps, disabled-friendly toilets, footpaths, railings, and accessible classrooms, libraries, and playgrounds. Principal 5 noted:

At the moment we are focused on academic support but the structures are not in place with related to environment.

Classroom resources were also lacking, and ‘often teachers must prepare their own resources for individual special needs’ (Principal 13).

2e. Lack of holistic inclusion. While schools were managing with what they have as mentioned above, principals noted a lack of inclusion in a holistic sense, as summed up in this comment by Principal 9:

Inclusion is in the name only. In our level, we can support and provide services. But in terms of planning and budgeting, inclusion is not respected. Holistic inclusion is not happening.

Principal 1 stated that ‘There should be constant follow up support’, and that the students were not ‘supported academically and socially with quality due to many constraints’. Principal 4 described a situation where a long-term student still felt ‘uncomfortable’ in the school setting:

In the same time they feel excluded when they cannot participate in some activities. The child with physical disability in our school hides himself whenever a teacher sits next to him to have meals together. He feels uncomfortable in a gathering despite being in the school for more than a decade.

An inability to participate despite being provided opportunities for inclusion was also mentioned by Principal 6:
Other recreational programs are hardly happen for inclusive kids as there are no such competition for inclusive students in Bhutan. Hence, chances are always taken by more able students in the mixed school setting scenario.

**Inclusion in Bhutan – The future – What needs to change**

1. **Curriculum and pedagogy**

Changes to the school curriculum need to be implemented in order to provide sustainable inclusive education in Bhutan. As stated by Principal 14, ‘For now, our curriculum are purely based on reading and writing’. Principal 4 stated:

> we mostly give basic social skills and lack to prepare them with skills which can make them independent and self-sufficient later.

However, as Principal 12 pointed out, the effectiveness of an inclusive curriculum is dependent on the way it is implemented by the teacher:

> Same curriculum works for inclusion. However, it depends on the how teacher translates the curriculum into meaningful learning.

A need to provide more flexibility in the curriculum was mentioned by several principals:

- Curriculum should be based on the adaptability, feasibility to modify and accommodate based on the needs. (Principal 10)
- It [curriculum] should be flexible, shouldn’t be exam oriented and vocational curriculum should be infused. (Principal 2)

Some principals mentioned the need for the curriculum to suit learners with diverse needs:

- there should be varying curricula as per the need of each individual: vocational curricula to formal curricula. At present, our curriculum is mandatory for everybody, no choice for the learners as per their abilities. (Principal 6)
- Frame different curricula depending on various disabilities as the existing practices isn’t much effective for those severely LD [learning disability] and slow learners which ultimately affects performance of other children. (Principal 3)

There is obviously a need for on-going professional development and training. We have previously referred to the need to improve teaching knowledge and skills and the challenge of a rigid curriculum and assessment programme.

As stated by Principal 13, more work is required to ensure that the curriculum is suitable for all children, not just those with special needs:

> We need to have a more outcomes-based, project-based, place-based, product-based curriculum that allows for skills to be developed and assessed. The whole assessment process needs to be reviewed for all students.

2. **Teachers and teacher training**

Principals expressed a strong need for appropriately trained staff in their schools. As Principal 8 pointed out:

> Some of our teaching faculty members are trained yet we have other untrained teachers who teach students with special need. Need more trained facilitators.
Providing teachers with training and workshops to enable them to work effectively with students with diverse needs was seen as essential by the principals, as seen in the following comments:

Provide training for them. Let them visit and learn through observations from other ventures. Just theory is not practical. (Principal 5)

Awareness and training should be given to all teachers in Bhutan so that they are self aware. (Principal 11)

teachers can be better supported by providing more professional development programs which make teachers resourceful which naturally gains respect. (Principal 4)

Some principals also recommended that the workload of teachers who work with children with disabilities should be reduced in other areas: ‘Reduce work load of SEN teachers from other school activity’ (Principal 10), and ‘Lessen their responsibilities so that they have ample of time to cater to every child’s need’ (Principal 14).

3. Resources and facilities
As mentioned earlier, principals identified a lack of resources and facilities as a barrier to providing inclusive education in their schools. This is influenced by a lack of financial resources in Bhutan which is a less developed country. To move forward in this area, principals are realistic and made the following comments:

Study the existing facilities of the school and build upon it timely. (Principal 1)

Use all the resources available locally and if not ask from the relevant agencies. (Principal 11)

It is clear that principals in the study schools are doing their best with limited resources to support the implementation of inclusive education in Bhutan.

4. Acceptance and support
While principals indicated a level of acceptance was felt by students with disabilities in their schools, they also discussed a need for further acceptance and support on a wider-reaching societal level. This is particularly of interest considering the cultural and religious background of Bhutan.

As children, teachers and parents become more aware of people with special needs there will be more acceptance and societal inclusion. Schools not only educate children with special needs but also educate all students about special needs. As these children grow into adults they will have better understanding of differences and how everyone can contribute to society. They can share their knowledge to build a better, more inclusive society. Through making the physical school environment accessible society will have a good example to follow in other areas (e.g. business, offices, stores). (Principal 13)

The implementation of ‘awareness and advocacy programmes’ (Principal 2) and ‘shar[ing] success stories of the SEN programme’ (Principal 10) were mentioned as ways to increase awareness and acceptance in the community. Principals discussed ‘sensitising programmes’ which create awareness of the needs of children with disabilities at the community level: ‘more sensitising programme for the society to accept everyone’ (Principal 14). Principals also expressed a need for support for inclusive education from all stakeholders.
5. Research and policy
The need for appropriate policy to be put in place to ensure changes to the provision of inclusive education was raised. This is an important issue and needs to be addressed in the future. The principals are seeking policy support from the Ministry of Education. For example, Principal 4 indicated:

To accommodate everyone education should have policies which cater to children with special needs. If things are settled on at a policy level definitely there will be a change in education.

However, principals also expressed a need for a research-based approach to the development of inclusive policy. This issue was raised many times and this quote indicates the need for research to occur in the context of Bhutan:

Time has come for us to think out of box. There are many emerging needs particularly for children who have special needs. Time has come for us to question our assumptions and look for the reality. We need to carry out need analysis and come up with appropriate interventions and strategies to help the children who are in this area. (Principal 7)

6. Funding
Funding was an issue highlighted by the principals and this will be a challenge for such a small country with limited resources in the future. In particular, some principals suggested that a separate and larger budget for the SEN programme would be appropriate:

There should be separate budget for the inclusive schools. (Principal 1)

Allocate separate budget head for SEN program in schools. (Principal 10)

A larger budget for purchasing resources according to the needs of the inclusive school will help. (Principal 13)

Discussion
Principals and teachers in Bhutan are trying their best to support the learning of students with disabilities and progress a more inclusive approach to education as expected by the Ministry of Education in Bhutan. The perspectives of the school principals highlighting what is working well and what are the future challenges highlight the political, social, and economic context that needs to be considered in a less developed country. Listening to the voices of the participants in this study supports a critical perspective about the global work in inclusive education. It is clear that there are many challenges in implementing inclusive education due to confusion about what inclusion and inclusive practices mean in the context of Bhutan. Policy makers, teachers, and other respective stakeholders are still unclear about what inclusion truly means, confusing it with other educational concepts such as integration and special education (Dorji 2015).

Additionally, due to the heterogeneity of the Bhutanese society that consists of urban modern Buddhists and a larger number of less literate traditional ones, disability is viewed largely through the lens of the medical model of disability and other religious karmic beliefs and conceptualisations (Kamenopoulou and Dukpa 2017; Schuelka 2012). Such contrasting interpretations and influences have then caused varying views
and understanding of disabilities and this impacts how inclusion and special education policy and practice are understood, supported, and implemented in schools. In countries like Bhutan, there are many children who are yet to access an education. In 2010, UNESCO estimated that there were more than 900 million children not at school and it is likely that many of these children will have a disability.

Furthermore, in Bhutan there is still no definite legislation that supports people with disabilities and their right to education or a well-defined policy that conveys the concept of inclusion clearly (Chhetri 2015; Dorji 2015). The lack of clarity in the comprehension of the idea of inclusion is subsequently shown in the Bhutanese policy documents where terms such as special educational needs and inclusion are being used interchangeably. This then affects the Bhutanese teachers, principals, and schools as it also creates further confusion, adding to the many challenges they are already facing in implementing inclusion in classes. The teachers of Bhutan have been time and again labelled as under resourced, under supported, and under prepared to face the diversity inclusive classes offer and as lacking the skills to cater to the various range of abilities in the students (Chhetri 2015; Dorji 2015; Dorji and Schuelka 2016).

It is important to take note of the cultural and political perspectives in the reported data that illustrate how Bhutan is grounding the inclusive education agenda in their policy and practice. Buddhist cultural values and principles support the government focus on including all students in schools and ideals of equity. The principals and teachers, however, work within a historical context that supports society beliefs in karmic actions and segregation of people with disability. The deeply held beliefs and values of the people are acknowledged and need to be considered in respectful ways in the context of education reform and change. There are positive opportunities for future progress because each and every school is expected to support the GNH-based policies and practices and these provide a framework to support the philosophy of inclusion in schools and in Bhutan society.

In Bhutan, the regular regional seminars, workshops, and public advocacy programmes have significantly created awareness among the stakeholders to work together and contribute towards promoting inclusive practices in society (UNICEF 2013). Bhutan is also making good progress by implementing teacher training programmes that will support better education for a more inclusive society where people with disabilities can enjoy equal rights and dignity regardless of their disability.

Conclusion

This paper has reported on a study conducted by ‘researching professionals’ (Atkins and Wallace 2012) in Bhutan. The insights presented in the background to the study and the data are valuable to promote understanding about how collaborative research that respects the historical and cultural context can inform future development of inclusive education in this country and in other countries around the world. Fourteen school principals responded to a questionnaire regarding how inclusive education is progressing in their schools. The data indicate that there is a need at both the school and national level to better understand the cultural and social context and how inclusive education and special education models work together to support more inclusive education in Bhutan. The data provide insights about the challenges and commitment of staff, students, and families from a less developed country and illustrate the ‘experimentation and progression
towards enabling policies, establishing infrastructure as well as developing human resources for the implementation’ (Mukhopadhay 2009, 70). The ideas presented in this paper reinforce our understanding that inclusive education cannot ‘travel seamlessly across cultures and contexts’ as we continue to learn about how diversity is understood and supported in education contexts around the world (Kozleski, Artiles, and Waitoller 2011, 8).

**Note**

1. In the medical model, disability is seen as an illness or impairment which prevents the individual from being ‘normal’. The problem is inherent within the individual not the system. The individual requires treatment (Carrington and MacArthur 2012).

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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References


**Appendix 1: Survey questionnaire for principals.**

Name of the School:
Principal (Name): Contact no: Email ID:
Total children in school:
Total children with special needs in school:
When did the school become inclusive school?

1. How would you define inclusion?
2. What are the advantages/disadvantages of inclusion?
3. Do you feel that inclusion is working well in your school (yes or no) and why?
4. Do you feel that every child has been helped academically and socially in an inclusive environment in your school?
5. How do you think children with disabilities feel about being in an inclusive classroom? Can you tell us about an example?
6. How do you think parents of children with disabilities feel about being in an inclusive classroom? Can you tell us about an example?
7. Do you feel that educators have the support, resources, training, and time to implement inclusion effectively? If not, what support, resources, and training would be helpful to you?
8. How can inclusive education promote successful learning in your school?
9. The notion of inclusion is still often associated with children who have special needs. Why?
10. How does education need to change to accommodate everyone?
11. How do curricula need to change to improve learning and encourage the inclusion of all pupils?
12. How can teachers be better supported and respected for their work? How can we provide resources to support schools to be inclusive? How can inclusive education lead to more inclusive societies?