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Bhutan
Case Study

Situation Analysis on the Effects of and Responses to COVID-19 on the Education Sector in Asia

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Foreword

> The pandemic caused a major children's rights crisis: all service sectors being profoundly impacted, with the most disadvantaged being disproportionately affected.

COVID-19 – possibly the largest pandemic the world has ever seen- led to an economic crisis probably more radical and global than ever before; as well as disruption of learning on an unprecedented scale. The pandemic caused a major children's rights crisis: all service sectors being profoundly impacted, with the most disadvantaged being disproportionately affected.

In response, with support from the Global Partnership for Education, UNICEF and UNESCO joined forces with Mott MacDonald, Cambridge Education to carry out a situation analysis, primarily to generate analyses to inform strategic responses to the crisis going forward. While the extension and duration of the pandemic required to invest more time to produce the final analyses and reports, fortunately information had already been discussed through webinars and national conversations with Ministries of Education and other partners across large parts of the Asia Pacific region.

Furthermore, the reports continue to be of utmost relevance given subsequent waves of COVID-19 sweeping across the world in 2021 and very likely in 2022 as well. The task of learning from the crisis and how to mitigate its effects in education is on-going. More than one academic year has now been lost for many children. To ensure continuity of learning whilst schools are closed, the delivery of education is radically changing today through distance education: digital, blended or hybrid learning have become part of the new learning reality which all Governments, teachers and learners will have to adjust to.

While major efforts are needed to mitigate the learning loss of those children who return to school in the post-COVID-19 recovery phase, we must also remember that many children were not learning before the crisis and several million were not even in schools. The reports therefore also explore opportunities to build back better and to re-imagine education; to shift from fact-based didactic methodologies to competency-based approaches, which are more flexible, better respond to the holistic needs and aspirations of all children, and provide opportunities for life-long learning as per the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 4 agenda.

While the suite of reports provided within the Regional Situation Analysis are particularly relevant to the Asia Pacific region, contexts of course vary considerably across our huge region. At the same time, the reports may also provide insights that are relevant to other regions around the world. Hopefully the findings, including the country case studies, and regional budget needs analysis will help governments resume and accelerate progress towards SDG 4. The way education is conceptualized and delivered is changing fast, and the transformation journey will be steep and full of challenges. Governments, donors, all partners and the private sector will need to work together, not only to get the strategies and levels of investment right, but to build more resilient, effective and inclusive systems, able to deliver on the promise of education as a fundamental human right for all children, whether schools are open or closed.

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List of acronyms

BCSE	Bhutan Certificate of Secondary Education
BCSEA	Bhutan Council for School Examinations and Assessment
CLT	Cluster lead teacher
COVID-19	Coronavirus disease
ECCD	Early childhood care and development
EiE	Education in Emergencies
EMIS	Education management information system
FY20	2020 financial year
GPE	Global Partnership for Education
ICT	Information and communications technology
MHPSS	Mental health and psychosocial support
MoE	Ministry of Education
MoH	Ministry of Health
REC	Royal Education Council
SIM	Self-instruction materials
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WASH	Water, sanitation and health
WFP	World Food Programme

Executive summary

The study

UNICEF and UNESCO have together organized a rapid assessment of the effects of COVID-19 on education across the Asian continent and the responses of individual countries to this pandemic. Cambridge Education, operating as part of Mott Macdonald, was commissioned to conduct this assessment, with the following objectives:

- To assess the impacts of the pandemic on the education sector in Asia
- To examine the policy and financial implications in terms of progress towards achieving SDG4 (Education) by 2030
- To identify good examples of responses and strategies in education and associated social sectors which can be shared with other countries.

The Situation Analysis has picked out examples of effective country approaches which could be replicated or adapted for use in other countries. These case studies provide a deeper analysis of how education systems have been refocused quickly in challenging circumstances to ensure children can safely continue to learn.

Background

Bhutan is a Himalayan country with a population of 774,876. About half (52 per cent) of the population live in rural areas with a low population density of only 20 people per km^2.[1] Urban areas are much more densely populated.[2]

Pre-COVID-19, unemployment had been decreasing and inflation levels were low.[3] The approach to development in Bhutan is underpinned by the goal towards 'Gross National Happiness', which prioritizes people's well-being.

Most teachers in primary and secondary school have Bachelor's degrees and they are the highest paid civil servants in the country,[4] reflecting the value placed by Bhutan on its teachers. There is high enrolment in schools: net enrolment at primary level was over 90 per cent in 2020, with more females enrolled than males. But education quality and learning outcomes are low compared with international standards.

The draft National Education Policy of June 2020 describes the policy direction of the education system, breaking down the broad areas in the 12th Five Year Plan. Plans included the development of information

and communications technology (ICT) to leverage the power of ICT in teaching and learning; the strengthening of literacy and numeracy (including encouraging reading habits), science, technology, engineering and mathematics; and the role of assessment. It emphasizes that Bhutanese culture lies at the heart of the curriculum.[5] The policy aims to develop nationally rooted and globally competent citizens.

Bhutan, like many other countries, was not prepared for an emergency in the form of a pandemic. There are emergency plans for disasters such as earthquakes, but a global pandemic required an entirely different type of response. Despite this lack of preparedness, there was a significant and speedy intervention from the Ministry of Education (MoE) to ensure continuity and support for pupils. However, various factors contributed to the potential loss of learning:

Lack of face-to-face contact – Even with measures in place to support distance learning, there is no substitute for face-to-face contact with a teacher, which encourages focus, interaction and the chance to get feedback on learning. Children in the lower primary classes are most affected by this lack.

Access (or not) to technology – The government has made great strides in providing internet and mobile networks even into remote areas. With an education response to the pandemic that relies heavily on the use of technology, the digital divide (in terms of devices) has a big impact on children. Many families are unable to afford computers, smart phones or a television set and are thus unable to take advantage of the connectivity.

Reduced time for learning – Many factors have reduced learning time. The actual 'teaching' time during the pandemic was vastly reduced. And even assuming children watched all the TV broadcasts for their age range every day, the contact time is much less than an average school day of about five hours.

Children in remote communities – These children have multiple barriers to learning. They are unlikely to have access to TV broadcasts or be able to get online, and many will lack parental support for the effective use of self-instructional materials. Many children, particularly new entrants, won't have heard English (the medium of instruction) for almost a year because they won't have been in school and they will struggle to follow teaching on their return to school.

Children with disabilities – There is little information about the effect of COVID-19 on children with disabilities in mainstream schools. It is likely that they will face the same barriers, depending on their circumstances, as other children in the school. Many of them will have additional needs too.

Early childhood care and development (ECCD) – When ECCD centres closed in March 2020 (at the same time as regular schools) it affected 9,400 children, about 23 per cent of children aged 3–5 years who had been receiving regular developmental support from a trained ECCD facilitator. This type of support relies on face-to-face contact, as interaction with young children is critical to help them develop foundational language and social skills.

The effects of almost a year of school closures are likely to be far reaching. Evidence suggests that it will be children from disadvantaged households, particularly the hardest-to-reach children in remote communities and the urban poor, who will fall furthest behind.

Children with some disabilities involving underlying health conditions are at particular risk of developing infections if they catch COVID-19. Safe practice is therefore critically important. Conditions upon return to school need to facilitate hygiene practices that minimize the risk of spreading the virus.

There is a record number of children being supported by counselling services, which is a cause for concern. Worry about returning to school and academic performance is understandable, as students were not only having to cope with reduced learning time and an uncertain schedule, but also had to manage a totally different way of learning, for which they were unprepared and which relied on self-discipline and independent thought.

Slow economic growth, increased inflation and higher unemployment resulting from the pandemic will put increased pressure on families and will have a secondary impact on children and their ability to access and participate in education.

Responses to COVID-19

There is a clear, joined-up approach between the MoE and other sectors. Health messages are threaded throughout the Ministry's communication platforms (websites, social media and emergency response documents) and are disseminated by teachers as they visit communities. The Ministry identified the schools that most needed water, sanitation and health (WASH) facilities and planned to improve the supply of piped water and general hygiene and sanitation facilities.[6]

As of 28 May 2020, the government has identified the most vulnerable 10,000 students as 'economically backward and displaced students, children with single parents, those with disabilities, children of landless farmers and divorced parents, including students depending on Kidu'[7] and is providing food for them under the Take-Home Ration Programme.

The main social protection measure adopted by the government is Druk Gyalpo's Relief Kidu. It is a social assistance measure which had, by 6 June 2020, provided support to 16,452 people for a total value of BTN 184 million (some $2.5 million), BTN 7.2 million (roughly $97,000) of which was allocated to children.

In consultation with multiple stakeholders, the MoE developed guidelines for the reopening of schools. The guidelines made close reference to the framework for re-opening schools developed by UNICEF with UNESCO, the World Bank, the World Food Programme (WFP) and UNHCR. In line with the country's holistic approach to education, the guidelines covered many aspects of the return to school, including safety, health and well-being, psychosocial support and the implementation of a prioritized curriculum.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, 213 schools and 250 monastic institutions with 13,458 monks and nuns (12,168 monks and 1,290 nuns) and 51,352 (27,398 girls and 24,121 boys) schoolchildren across all 20 districts have received critical WASH supplies (including 50,000 bars of soap and 5,000 handwashing posters) through UNICEF support.

WASH interventions are included in the Safe Schools Guidelines for school reopening during the COVID-19 pandemic through UNICEF support. Through these interventions,the total number of handwashing tap points has increased to 17,071 tap points (an increase of 77 per cent) from 9,654 tap points before the on-set of the pandemic in early 2020.

Challenges

Developing appropriate teaching and learning materials, and deciding on novel approaches that would include groups of children for whom participation is a challenge raised critical questions for MoE planners:

- **How to support children in learning where there was less connectivity and where parents found it more difficult or were unable to purchase supporting technology?** With low literacy rates amongst the population, providing learning support for students was essential if learning loss was to be minimized.
- **How to support learning for children with a diverse range of disabilities and learning needs, requiring a more individualized response?** For example, children with physical disabilities will have very different needs to children with Down's syndrome or children with hearing or visual impairments.
- **How to support young children remotely who need to develop social skills reliant on close interaction?**

Mitigating learning loss

A two-phase education plan in response to school closures was developed by the MoE with development partners, particularly UNICEF. The Ministry commented that developing the education emergency response had been an interactive, positive process and that many had learned through the engagement.

The Ministry received a grant of $750,000 from the Global Partnership for Education (GPE), channelled through Save the Children, to support activities identified in the emergency response. The application had four main components:[8]

- **Component 1:** Supporting the adapted and prioritized Education in Emergencies (EiE) curriculum
- **Component 2:** Strengthening WASH infrastructure in schools to enhance the health and safety of children and staff
- **Component 3:** Education continuity for children with disabilities
- **Component 4:** Improved psychosocial support.

The MoE has an education management information system (EMIS) which annually records data collected at Dzongkhag (district) and Thromde (municipality) level. This data informed the response and was used in the development of the EiE plan. During the early months of the response, the Ministry carried out an online survey of teachers, students and parents to gather their opinions on the provision for learning continuity during school closure. Feedback was generally very positive, although critical comments gave pointers for further improvement and development. As yet there is no wider evaluation of participation and quality of inputs, or assessment of learning from a representative sample of the school population, although this is planned.[9]

The Royal Education Council (REC) modified the curriculum to be delivered in two stages:

- An adapted curriculum, to be implemented whilst schools were closed; and
- A prioritized curriculum for schools that reopened before August 2020.[10]

The approach to curriculum adaptation is pragmatic, focusing on key learning requirements and, particularly for younger children, on essential areas that are achievable with minimum support.

Once children return to school, the Guidelines for Reopening Schools recommended that the adapted curriculum be shifted to the prioritized curriculum. The guidelines advocated a student-centred approach and suggested that teachers spend time getting to know their students again, start with 'bridging' lessons, easing them back into school before starting curriculum-focussed work. The key challenge for the curriculum planners now is what to do once schools re-open in February 2020 after learners have been out of school for almost a year. There is no guarantee that learners will have learned the concepts that were taught through broadcast media and self-learning materials. The implementation of assessment plans[11] will be a critical part of the next steps to identify what children know and can do, so learning areas can be prioritized both for immediate planning and in the longer term.

Many teachers took a proactive role to encourage learning during school closures. Although not mandated by the MoE, some teachers took their own initiative and were able to move from village to village, supporting children in small groups or as individuals in their homes. This was where the geography of the country was an advantage to some teachers. In remote villages the natural barriers mean that it is possible to control entry into the villages, so everyone knew if there was a possibility of infection, making face-to-face contact relatively safe.[12] This approach was particularly instrumental and useful to support children with disabilities and ECCD children.

There has been a significant focus on the hard-to-reach children, through provision of printed materials and teacher support. The MoE's focus on disadvantaged children clearly comes through in all their plans. However, there are groups of children who have not had access to any learning for the past year for the reasons described above. Further disaggregation of data would have helped to identify these children and target them with learning solutions adapted to their needs.

Lessons learned

- To ensure children's continued development there needs to be a comprehensive approach, focused on learning, which provides teacher support, a modified curriculum and a variety of delivery mechanisms.
- Whilst there was a significant focus on making provision for hard-to-reach children, it was felt that there could have been more provision for children with disabilities.
- A traditional way of teaching hampers a teacher's ability to be flexible and adaptable, which was a necessary skill for this type of response.
- The Ministry produced very detailed plans and communicated them through their website and the Dzongkhags/Thromdes, so that there was consistency in approach. These plans were redundant treated as working documents which were adapted as necessary to the changing situation.
- As with most countries, the Bhutanese system was not ready for such an emergency. Forward planning and preparation including teacher training, school hygiene and building student familiarity with ICT would have made it easier to provide a response.
- Working together is a strong model to blend different knowledge and experience.
- As Bhutan is a small country with many remote and inaccessible areas, there could have been a more localized approach – schools in remote areas where travel is already limited could perhaps have remained open, while minimizing health risks.
- The curriculum needs to be flexible to allow for significantly different levels of learning on return to school, both in classes and in different areas of the curriculum.

Recommendations

The recommendations consider ways to build on the successes, plans and lessons learned from the COVID-19 experience and are aligned with national plans and the Education in Emergency Phase II plan. They are summarized below:

- Monitor and evaluate the response to inform future planning. Use data to plan specifically for hard-to-reach children.
- Build on the student-centred approach adopted during the pandemic and use it as a springboard to strengthen teaching and learning.
- Prepare teachers to play a different role with regards to teaching through distance learning.
- Strengthen planning and implementation for children with disabilities so that the system can meet their needs in a variety of settings.

Conclusion

One of Bhutan's strengths in the face of the pandemic was its ability to build on existing structures. ICT and the good internet coverage were crucial. Social protection mechanisms were extended to ease the financial impact on the poorest families. The counselling service was quickly adapted so that people could access it if they had concerns related to the pandemic. Strong mechanisms and systems can make the system more resilient and minimize the impact of future shocks.

Schools now need to be reopened and all children brought back into school safely to have face-to-face contact with teachers. Being in a classroom with a teacher promotes children's holistic development. Formative assessments of all children should be carried out and the results used to inform accelerated learning and remediation strategies so that children are being taught at the level they have reached.

Learning loss due to school closure needs to be remedied. This will require careful long-, medium- and short-term planning to build on the lessons learned from the pandemic response. The process has the potential both to improve the quality of teaching and learning, and to put the country in a stronger position to face future emergencies.

Country fact sheet

The table below provides a snapshot of the pandemic, the response of the education sector and some background information.

DIMENSION	INDICATOR/QUESTION	INFORMATION
Epidemiology	Date of first confirmed case	5 March 2020
	Date of first confirmed death	9 January 2021
	COVID-19 cases and deaths over time	842 cases, 1 death (up to mid-January 2021)[13]
	Details about the pandemic and government responses and support	Public health prioritized over all secondary effects of the virus
School closure	Were schools closed, either partially or fully?	Fully closed until the end of July 2020
	Date of school closure	18 March 2020
	Date of school reopening	Classes IX–XII (middle and upper secondary schools) opened in August 2020, and all schools opened for 2021 academic year, staggered between mid-February and mid-April 2021 and starting with the younger age-groups.
	Have schools reopened fully or partially?	Partially reopened for classes IX-XII in August 2020
	What phase is the country currently in? Phase 1 (prior to re-opening), 2 (part of the re-opening process) or 3 (schools reopened) and is this nationally or regionally?	Phase 1 with most schools closed, apart from Classes IX-XII. Preparations were made to reopen primary and lower secondary in February.
School population[14]	How many children are there in each stage of education?	School-age population is 275,012 which is approx. one third of the population
	Number of students in general schools [NB additional students are in private, monastic, non-formal, tertiary, extended classrooms and central schools]	School type / Female / Male / Total ECCD: 3,420 / 3,503 / 6,923 Primary: 20,450 / 20,715 / 41,165 Lower secondary: 12,462 / 12,326 / 24,788 Middle secondary: 23,185 / 22,292 / 45,477 Higher secondary: 23,781 / 21,495 / 45,276 Special institutions: 59 / 70 / 129 Total: 79,937 / 76,898 / 156,835
Key vulnerable groups	What are the key vulnerable groups affected by the impact of COVID-19 on the education sector?	• Children in remote communities • Children of parents who are socioeconomically disadvantaged including from urban areas • Children with disabilities
Education system structure	Brief description of the structure of the education system – federal or centralized	• The MoE is the central body responsible for policy formation. The central ministry has three main departments, each of which has various programmes. • Dzongkhags and Thromdeys are decentralized constituencies. Each Dzongkhag has a Dzongdag (governor) but further down there are local government structures. • There are 20 Dzongkhags in Bhutan and four Thromdeys. The education offices of these constituencies are managed by Chief Education Officers and Deputy Chief Education Officers. They execute policies and programmes determined by the central ministry.
Pre-COVID-19 progress towards SDG4 indicators[15]	Annual education statistics 2020 / Female / Male / Average	
	Gross enrolment rate primary (%): 110 / 108 / 109	
	Gross enrolment rate secondary (%): 98 / 89 / 93	
	Primary completion rate (%): 94 / 86 / 90	
	Dropout rate (%): 0.3 / 2.4 / 1.4	
	Gender parity for primary: 0.98	
	Gender parity for secondary: 1.11	

01
Introduction

> Some of the most vulnerable children felt the side-effects of COVID-19 from the moment nationwide lockdowns were put in place to control the spread of the disease.

1.1. Background

The global nature of the COVID-19 pandemic has affected all countries with the twin shocks of a health emergency and an economic recession. This will lead to long-term costs on human capital accumulation, development prospects and welfare. Responses to the situation have disproportionally affected the most vulnerable and marginalized members of society.

Some of the most vulnerable children felt the side-effects of COVID-19 from the moment nationwide lockdowns were put in place to control the spread of the disease. Markets, workshops, farms and factories closed, leaving children and families stranded. For many, the fear and uncertainty continue. Some minorities find themselves stigmatized and accused of causing or spreading the pandemic. Deep-rooted inequalities in societies are being exposed.

Asia, with its huge population and many overcrowded cities, is potentially very vulnerable to COVID-19 which spreads through close contact with infected people. The contexts within which people of South Asia, Southeast Asia and East Asia are having to cope with the virus are vastly different, with disparities in living conditions and varying degrees of access to and quality of essential health and education services. Across the continent there is vast inequality between the rich and poor, and therefore different levels of resilience to the shocks that this disease has brought – the poor face long-term risk far beyond contracting the virus. This region regularly suffers from other emergencies which lead to localized learning interruptions. For example, during the pandemic Bangladesh and India were in the path of a cyclone, and floods have recently threatened communities, giving double shocks.

This Situation Analysis was undertaken as part of the broader analysis initiated by UNICEF and UNESCO to provide a snapshot of the educational responses and effects of COVID-19 across Asia. It considers the direct effects of school closures and reopening, and identifies initial impacts on learners, their families and the education system as a whole. It aims to develop insight based on the responses to the pandemic in Asia, seeking to understand the contextual factors that may have supported (or hindered) learning and paying particular attention to the most disadvantaged groups. For this, the analysis has the following objectives:

- To assess and estimate the various impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the education sector and stakeholders in Asia.
- To examine the policy and financial implications on progress towards achieving SDG4 (Education) by 2030.
- To identify examples of promising responses and strategies in education and associated social sectors which can be shared with other countries.

The Situation Analysis looks at how teachers, learners and parents have been affected by, and education systems have responded to, the threat of COVID-19. It identifies examples of effective country approaches which could be replicated or adapted for use in other countries.

1.2. Methodology

The study includes an overview of the situation in the three sub-regions (South Asia, Southeast Asia and East Asia) with case studies providing a more in-depth look at specific areas in 14 countries, including the whole of South Asia. The case studies have been supported by the UNICEF and UNESCO offices in each country, which have provided information and assisted the researchers to contact relevant officials and collect country-specific documents, grey literature and data. This information tells the story of the COVID-19 journey across Asia, its impact and the responses of each education system.

Following a literature review, each case study involved interviews with key stakeholders (listed in the Annex) which include government policy makers and implementers, UNICEF and UNESCO teams, teachers, principals, officials from the MoE and organizations working with people with disabilities. This provided an opportunity to hear about the challenges faced and the responses developed; it also allowed discussion and debate on lessons learned and what still needs to be done.

1.3. Structure of the case study

There are four sections. Following the country fact sheet and this introduction, Chapter 2 discusses the effects of COVID-19 on the education system across four dimensions (see Figure 2 below); challenges are identified and the responses set out against the three phases of school reopening, depending on the specific country context. Chapter 3 provides a 'deep dive' into a particular theme identified by the UNICEF and UNESCO country teams. Chapter 4 provides an overview of the lessons learned and makes specific recommendations on building back better and increasing the resilience of the education system to future shocks.

FIGURE 1 | THREE PHASES OF SCHOOL REOPENING

FIGURE 2 | FOUR DIMENSIONS OF ANALYSIS OF EFFECTS

02

Effects of and response to COVID-19 on the education sector in Bhutan

Bhutan is a Himalayan country (population 774,876) bordered by China and India. Fifty-two per cent of the population live in rural areas, with a low population density of only 20 people per km^2,[16] although there is a huge disparity between urban and rural areas.[17] Mountainous areas in the southeast, for example, have a very small population. In 2020 adult literacy rates were 75 per cent for men and 57 per cent for women.[18]

"The Kingdom of Bhutan is considered a development success story with decreasing poverty and improvements in human development indicators." – World Bank[19]

Pre-COVID-19, unemployment had been decreasing and inflation levels were low.[20] Underpinning Bhutan's approach to development is the goal of 'gross national happiness', which prioritizes working together to reduce poverty.

"While economic development is important, it is also important to invest in other aspects that are the satisfiers of human happiness. For example, you must invest in health — not just physical health, but also mental health. You must invest in programmes that support strong community trust and relationships, and on preserving the environment." – Director, Centre for Bhutan and Gross National Happiness Studies[21]

This philosophy underpins life in Bhutan and along with a 'do no harm' approach has driven the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Director of the Centre for Bhutan and Gross National Happiness[22] studies, during an interview in July talked about the importance of society coming together to provide the response to a pandemic which has affected everyone. The government developed a Comprehensive National Response Plan to strengthen the capacity of the health system to deliver response and recovery, and increase resilience, putting protection of the most vulnerable communities at the centre. The protection of the health of all citizens was given the highest priority, with the preservation of life given priority against all secondary outputs.

This approach is visibly supported by the King of Bhutan who has set up his own social protection fund for citizens financially affected by the pandemic. He also visited different parts of the country to spread health messages.

"I would like to thank His Majesty for keeping us safe from COVID-19. Let us all follow His Majesty's leadership and adapt to the guideline provided by the Ministry of Health to combat COVID-19." – Karma Yuden, ECCD facilitator [23]

The government took many measures to contain the virus, helped by the country's topography and small population. Once the virus struck on 5 March 2020, the government acted quickly to protect its citizens, closing borders to international tourism and imposing a strict quarantine period for those returning from abroad. On 18 March education institutions were closed. At first the cases were confined to people in quarantine, but the first case of community transmission occurred in August 2020, at which point the country went into strict lockdown to protect the health of its citizens. These measures were successful in containing the pandemic: 10 months after the first case appeared there have been just 842 cases[24] and only one death.

The school system has a diversity of provision to reach different populations of learners (Table 1). There are general schools, private schools, non-formal education, monastic education and schools specifically for children with special educational needs. Most children are in the 497 government schools. Over 100 (18 per cent) government schools have no road access;[25] in the Dzongkhags of Haa, Gasa and Samtse over 40 per cent of schools have no road access.

TABLE 1 | NUMBER OF SCHOOLS [26]

SCHOOLS / INSTITUTES / CENTRES	GOVERNMENT	PRIVATE	TOTAL
Early Childhood Development			
ECCD Centres	432	63	495
School Education			
Primary schools	304	15	319
Lower secondary schools	60	1	61
Middle secondary schools	70	1	71
Higher secondary schools	61	21	82
Special institutions	2	0	2
Sub-total	497	38	535

The MoE has invested in building more primary schools so that children don't have to walk long distances to school. Extended classrooms were introduced to bring education to children who live in remote rural communities and scattered villages. Previously many children would either have had to walk long distances to get to the nearest school, or board at school far away from their families. These classrooms are linked to a parent school, which supplies teachers and learning materials and provides

a three-year multi-grade education in local community centres, outreach clinics, non-formal centres and village houses. Once children have completed the three years, they tend to go and board at other schools. Across the country there are 74 extended classrooms with 1,732 learners and 133 teachers (77 per cent male and 23 per cent female).[27]

Schooling in Bhutan is about much more than academic achievement, as stated in the goals of the draft National Education Policy (2019):

"The purpose of education is to develop citizens that value Bhutan's unique national identity, traditional wisdom and culture, who are prepared for right livelihood, and practise contemplative learning. It is also to develop individuals who are lifelong learners, who have a holistic understanding of the world and have a genuine care for others and nature. It should also develop all citizens' competency to deal effectively with the contemporary world, individuals who are critical, creative, informed and engaged in civic affairs."[28]

Most teachers in primary and secondary school have Bachelor's degrees and they are the highest paid civil servants in the country,[29] showing the value placed on teachers. There is high enrolment in schools – in 2020 net enrolment at primary level was over 90 per cent, with more males enrolled than females. Gross enrolment at secondary education is also high at 93 per cent with more females than males.[30] These statistics suggest that the country is very successful at getting children into school and keeping them there. Measures such as free education, including the provision of learning materials and stationery, and incentives for pupils to progress to Class XI have contributed to this achievement.

Education quality and learning outcome achievement is not high, however, when measured against international standards. A pilot study (in readiness for full implementation of PISA for Development (PISA-D) in 2021) to measure learning outcomes through PISA on a small sample was organized by the Bhutan Council for School Examinations and Assessment in 2017.

The PISA-D findings revealed that the average solution rate in Bhutan was 45 per cent in reading literacy, 39 per cent in mathematical literacy and 45 per cent in scientific literacy. When compared to the other seven participating PISA-D countries, the performance of Bhutan's students was ranked between the two highest performing PISA-D countries (Ecuador and Paraguay). The report further stated that a reliable estimate based on the percent correct scores was significantly below the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries and the best education systems in Asia.[31]

The PISA-D pilot found that 15-year-old girls outperformed boys in reading by 4 per cent and that boys outperformed girls in maths. Students performed better in items requiring lower cognitive skills but struggled with more demanding tasks.

The 12th Five Year Plan headlines the following areas for development: to improve the quality and relevance of the curriculum and its implementation; enhance the health and well-being of children and youth; enhance the quality of examination and assessment systems; enhance teacher development and support; and improve quality and inclusive school education.[32]

The draft National Education Policy, which is currently being finalized, describes the policy direction of the education system, breaking down the broad areas in the 12th Five Year Plan. Plans included the development of ICT to leverage the power of ICT in teaching and learning, the strengthening of literacy and numeracy (including encouraging reading habits), science, technology, engineering and mathematics, the role of assessment and emphasizes the importance of Bhutanese culture being at the heart of the curriculum.[33]

"Curriculum and pedagogy should provide opportunities for a variety of experiences and knowledge to enable students to think rationally, be reflective, understand the world through its various disciplines, and foster aesthetic appreciation and strive for global harmony. Curriculum should also promote the country's unique culture and tradition, values, while learning to participate actively in the process of building an educated, enlightened, and cohesive society."[34]

At the same time the document recognizes that there needs to be specific provision for targeted groups of children, especially for those children living in circumstances of extreme remoteness, high altitude and those with socio-economic disadvantages.

"The curriculum framework shall be inclusive of gender, students from low socio–economic backgrounds, diverse geographic locations, students with disabilities, domestic and work responsibilities. It shall contain enough flexibility as to enable students to complete basic and higher secondary education over an extended period, and to be adapted for students who are unable to access the general curriculum."[35]

Such were the priorities for development of education in Bhutan before the pandemic. But once the pandemic hit, the MoE had to revise these plans, initially in the short term, to develop a response.

This chapter shows the effects on learners who have been out of school due to the closures during the COVID-19 pandemic and how the education system has responded to ensured continuity of learning. This study is mostly concerned with the response for children in general education.

2.1 Effects of COVID-19 across four dimensions

Access to and participation in learning

Learners

Once the virus reached Bhutan all schools were closed, in line with the government's approach to containment. With schools closed for approximately 11 months for Key stages 1–3 and for 5 months for Key stages 4 and 5, it is inevitable that there will be learning loss, leaving some children falling further behind international standards. When schools closed, students had only had 7 weeks' attendance out of a possible 26 weeks' teaching time during the normal school year. A Research on Improving Systems of Education (RISE) Insights document modelled a set of scenarios which looked at likely learning loss over a period of time and concluded that whilst there will be short-term learning loss, it is of more concern that:

"These losses will accumulate into large and permanent learning losses as many children fall behind during school closures and never catch up."[36]

Various factors, identified below, contribute to the potential loss of learning, despite the significant and speedy intervention from the MoE to ensure continuity and support for pupils.

Lack of face-to-face contact

Even with measures in place to support distance learning, there is no substitution for face-to-face contact with a teacher, which encourages focus, interaction and the chance to get feedback on learning. One head teacher[37] commented that students lost interest in the broadcast lessons and found it difficult to focus.

Access to technology

The government has made great strides in making sure that internet and mobile networks reach the remote areas of the country. In 2017 the country had 75 per cent internet and broadband penetration (although subscribers only numbered 28,955 – less than 4 per cent of the population). There is 92 per cent mobile penetration and 532,089 subscribers (some 69 per cent of the population) to 3G, Gg and GPRS/EDGE.[38] In 2019, fibre network covered 20 Dzongkhag.[39]

Despite this generally wide coverage, only 60 per cent of households have access to the internet[40] and half of rural households have no access to television.[41] With an education response that focusses heavily on the use of technology, the digital divide has a big impact on children who don't have access to ICT or television. Whilst there is a high ownership of mobile phones,[42] learning is easiest on devices with good functionality and a large screen and there is no guarantee that students will gain regular access to the phone. Many families are unable to afford technology such as computers and smart phones to take advantage of the connectivity. And devices require electricity, which is not available throughout the country: in the Districts of Haa and Gasa over 30 per cent of schools have no electricity supply.

Reduced time for learning

Learners have faced several challenges which have reduced learning time. They include not having a quiet space to work, having to help out with household chores, competing demands on any technology device that is available, and no or interrupted electricity supply (which hampers evening work and prevents charging of devices). Teachers also described, during stakeholder interviews, the difficulties for parents to take care of their children during school closures. Some parents had to take young children out to work on the farm with them as there was no other way of looking after them during school hours. These children will have had less time for learning at home, and if they had access to a TV, they will have missed the broadcast lessons whilst out of the house.

The actual 'teaching' time during the pandemic was vastly reduced. Table 2 shows the number of broadcast hours in a week in July for the first three Key Stages. At this point the timetable was very congested, broadcasting lessons for all five Key Stages each week, so it's understandable that there was limited time for each key stage but, as is shown, even assuming the children watched all the TV broadcasts for their age range every day, the contact time is much less than an average school day of about five hours.

TABLE 2 | BROADCAST HOURS IN A SAMPLE WEEK (27–31 JULY 2020)

SUBJECT	KEY STAGE 1 (PP–PRIMARY III)	KEY STAGE 2 (PRIMARY IV–VI)	KEY STAGE 3 (CLASSES VII–IX)
Dzongha	28 minutes	54 minutes	-
English	62 minutes	58 minutes	53 minutes
Maths	52 minutes	101 minutes	102 minutes
Geography	-	-	24 minutes
Science	-	-	35 minutes
Number of minutes	142 minutes	213 minutes	214 minutes

Self-learning materials had time estimates for each lesson, but again this was less time than face-to-face contact that would be provided over the course of a school week in normal circumstances.

For some children, the above will have more impact than for others:

Children in remote communities

Children in remote communities have multiple barriers to learning. In these communities the children are unlikely to have access to TV broadcasts or be able to get online, and

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many will lack parental support for effective use of the self-instructional materials. Teachers may have kept in contact with some children but the reduction in contact hours will mean they are not getting enough support. Many of them won't have heard English, the medium of instruction, for almost a year because they won't have been in school and they will struggle to follow teaching on their return to school.

Children with disabilities

Annual education statistics[43] show that there are 24 schools with a special education needs programme, two specialized government institutions and two vocational training centres for children with disabilities catering for 997 children. The government takes an inclusive approach to education and is working towards all children with disabilities being given access to mainstream schools.

There is little information about the effects of COVID-19 on children with disabilities in mainstream schools, but it is likely that they will have the same barriers, depending on their circumstances, as other children in the school, but for many of them they will also have additional needs to keep them learning.

"For children with disabilities, remote home schooling not only requires access to adequate IT resources and internet, availability of books and other learning materials, but also access to specific assistive devices or special education curriculums that allow for a continuous education at home that accommodates the child's specific learning needs."[44]

Stakeholder interviews with organizations in Bhutan working with children with disabilities described some of the specific pandemic-related difficulties. Children with disabilities attending residential school in Thimpu (the capital city) were sent home when schools were closed, as it was considered too risky to a vulnerable community of children. Some children stayed in Thimphu, whilst others returned to rural village communities. Once home, they faced multiple barriers to continuing learning, some of which were similar to children in general schools, but they also had additional needs which could not be met within their homes and communities.

- The children were not used to technology nor to working alone. Appropriate learning materials were not readily available. The government print resources were not suitable for blind children and there were no braille versions. The TV broadcasts covered too much material for children who were accustomed to a slower pace of learning.[45]
- They were unable to access support and resources from their school. Many children suffered because they felt isolated away from support mechanisms and their friends, in homes and communities where it was not always possible to meet their varied needs. For example, children with severe hearing problems struggled to communicate in home communities where there was little or no knowledge of sign language.[46]

Anecdotally, there were also some positive effects of children with disabilities being at home. Parents saw the progress and achievements that children made over the period and learned strategies to support their children to take small learning steps.

Early learning

With ECCD centres closing in March 2020, 9,400 children were affected, about 25 per cent of the 3–5-year-olds who had been receiving regular developmental support from trained ECCD facilitator. The learning support given by these facilitators relies on face-to-face contact, as young children need such interaction to develop their basic language and social skills. Although the aim is to reach all children, there are some barriers to access, particularly for those children from remote areas.[47] In the early stages of the pandemic the facilitators still visited the children and were able to continue working with them. Once lockdown measures were introduced the facilitators relied on online platforms and WeChat with parents, which meant that they were unable to support children in same way.[48] However, there were some positive effects: one facilitator commented:

"We are receiving more support from parents as they are able to spend quality time with their children." – Meena Kumary Neopani, 20, and Dorji Lhamo, 26, ECCD facilitators[49]

Parents

Parents also face challenging circumstances, including competing work commitments, which hamper their ability to support their children academically.

"I have seen and heard that students in villages are busy attending to field works and helping their parents and they rarely get time to watch TV. The only time they get is in the evening and that too is used by their parents to update themselves with the news and panel discussion given on TV. On the other hand, the urban parents especially the office goers are too exhausted helping their kids. Many parents personally shared how they are tired guiding their children."[50] – Teacher from Trongsa

Parents see education as a priority for their children, but the high rates of illiteracy and the language of the self-instructional materials (English) means that many parents probably find it difficult to provide support for learning.

The effects of almost a year of school closures are likely to be far reaching and the above evidence suggests that it will be those children from disadvantaged households, particularly the hardest-to-reach children in remote communities, who will likely fall furthest behind, widening the learning gap.

Education systems

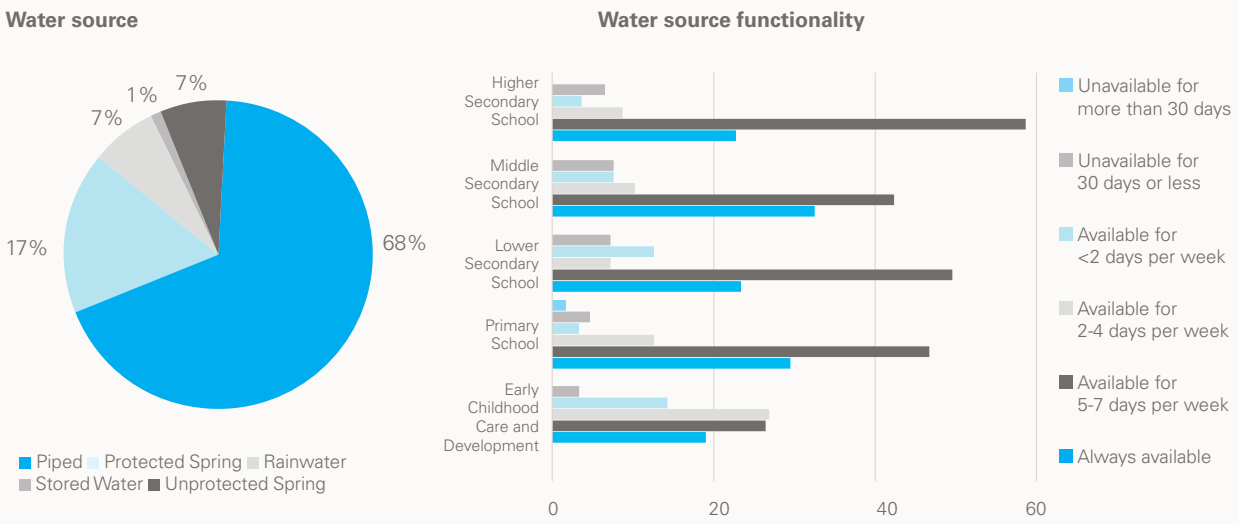
High-stakes exams were affected. Preparing tests proved a challenge, as restructuring of the curriculum meant that question banks were no longer available to bring people together for test development, and there were concerns over how to train the necessary people. Restrictions on movement and the effect on international trade affected the printing of the papers, which is usually outsourced to India. These high-stakes exams are critical for the development of human resources in Bhutan, so the MoE needs to make sure that they go ahead.

Safe operations

With only 842 cases and just one death in the country, keeping all citizens healthy and free from infection is of paramount importance. Whilst most children are not considered to be at risk of becoming severely ill with COVID-19, they can transmit it amongst the community. Children with disabilities involving underlying health conditions are at particular risk of developing infections if they catch COVID-19. Safe practice is therefore critically important. Conditions upon return to school need to facilitate hygienic practices to minimize the risk of spreading the virus.

Once children can return to school, they will all need sufficient working WASH facilities to protect themselves from infection and transmission. The Annual Education Statistics document[51] gives a detailed picture of the WASH situation in schools over the country. As can be seen from Figure 3, there is a range of water supplies to schools, both natural and piped, with some reliant on the weather. The second graph considers for how long the water is available. It shows that apart from higher education schools, less than half of schools have a continuous water supply of any type, with 12 per cent of lower secondary schools only having water available for two days a week. There is no published data disaggregated by District which would give a picture of which communities were most disadvantaged by lack of water, but as the information is collected through the Dzonkhags (Districts) it is likely that this data is available on the EMIS system.

FIGURE 3 | WATER SOURCES AND FUNCTIONALITY IN SCHOOLS



Health, well-being and protection

A record number of children are receiving support from counselling services, which is a cause for concern. Counselling services expect that there will be serious psychosocial issues once children return to school, as students have lost contact with peers. This is exacerbated for some older students who were moved from high-risk areas so they could continue their studies.[52]

The Kuensal newspaper reported that of 693 people reaching out to counsellors in the last six months, 451 were students, divided almost equally into males and females. Issues they were seeking counselling for included being unable to cope with online learning, and worries about their performance because of lack of access or expense of online education. Officials felt that students had lost some resilience to the situation as time went on and had become increasingly concerned about their studies. Many teachers also sought the counselling regarding returning to schools in a pandemic, as did parents who were worried about managing their children at home during closures.[53]

This worry about returning to school and academic performance is understandable, as students were not only having to cope with reduced learning time and an uncertain schedule, but also to manage a totally different way of learning, for which they were unprepared and which relied on self-discipline and independent thought. For students, particularly those preparing for high-stakes exams, it must have been extremely stressful.

The MoE are expecting increased dropout as a result of school closures. For Classes X and XII information was collected on how many students did not return to school once they were reopened in July 2020. Out of a total of 26,365 learners in those Key Stages, 210 students did not return. Reasons given included sickness, employment, marriage, change of school, decision to repeat, and being in conflict with the law. The numbers are broken down by District but there is no direct allocation of reasons to numbers of dropout nor are they disaggregated by gender.[54] Anecdotal evidence suggests that there will be further dropout once schools reopen fully. Many children want to return to school as they are bored at home, but others will drop out of school as they are worried they won't understand anything when they return.[55] Bhutan's

school feeding programme (supported by the WFP) covers about every second school-age child of the country (74,726 students were enrolled in 2019) (WFP 2020). With the closure of schools, children who depend on these meals will not have the same access to nutritional food which promotes their physical and mental development. Without the intervention, many children will be hungry, which will affect their ability to concentrate and participate in learning and, in younger children, their cognitive development.

Six out of ten children in Bhutan are reported to have experienced some form of physical violence pre-COVID-19, both within the home and outside.[56] Evidence from across the world shows that abuse was likely to be worse during lockdown.[57]

Stakeholder interviews with organizations working with children with disabilities revealed further challenges of meeting the basic needs of children from residential schools. The homes that children moved back to were not necessarily adapted for their needs and some were in difficult-to-navigate mountainous terrain. Children who needed daily access to professional support for their physical and mental health found that these services were not available in many Districts. The strict lockdown had implications for children with behavioural difficulties, as being confined to a small space was extremely challenging for both the child and the adult, putting severe pressure on households. Children with mobility issues suffered from a lack of opportunities to exercise and were more at risk of gaining weight.[58]

Finance

Bhutan's economy has been affected significantly by the COVID-19 crisis, with real GDP growth decelerating to 1.5 per cent in FY20 (from 3.8 per cent in FY19).[59] It is expected to continue to be slow, dropping to well below the five-year average of 5.5 per cent over the next few years as Bhutan's main industries take time to recover from the effects of COVID-19.

As a result of the pandemic the World Bank estimated that:

"An additional 5,503 people will fall into poverty based on the poverty line of $3.20 per day, and 14,083 people based on $5.50 per day. These represent many of the informal workers requiring social protection coverage."[60]

The lack of tourists has led to a decrease in service sector earnings, affecting the 30 per cent of urban households who rely on tourism for their livelihoods.[61] Manufacturing and construction suffered as imports and exports slowed down and foreign workers were unable to enter the country due to border restrictions. The agricultural sector proved to be more resilient due to government support. However, the price of domestic produce rose, which will affect rural families who cannot produce sufficient food for their needs.

Tourism is not expected to pick up again until 2021 and, with the increase in cases at the start of the year, it may take some time to recover, leaving unemployment levels high. The situation in India means that construction and manufacturing exports will be depressed.

Taken together these factors of slow economic growth, increased inflation and higher unemployment will put increased pressures on families and have a secondary impact on children in society and their ability to access and participate in education.

2.2 Education sector response to COVID-19 and support to continuity of learning

Phase 1: Prior to reopening

Access to and participation in learning

The MoE's various initiatives to support continuity of learning are detailed in chapter 3.

Safe operations

There is a clear joined-up approach within the MoE. Health messages are threaded throughout the MoE's communication platforms – websites, social media and emergency response documents – and are disseminated by teachers as they visit communities. The REC developed a curriculum implementation plan by 26 March 2020 as part of the emergency response. As well as ensuring continuity of learning, the plan intended to:

"Engage students productively at home and minimize people to people contact to prevent the spread of the virus."[62]

The Ministry of Health (MoH) provides information about the pandemic on its website which is updated daily so that the public can follow the status of the virus and the level of response. These health messages are reinforced on the MoE website – the National Situation Update prepared by the MoH appears on the MoE homepage along with a voice-over describing how the virus can be spread by children on their way to and in school and the actions each child should take to minimize the spread. This is linked to a video produced in conjunction with the MoH.[63] For families with access to the internet, situation updates are readily available and there is consistency of messages.

The MoE identified the schools most in need of WASH facilities and planned to improve the supply of piped water and general hygiene and sanitation facilities.[64]

As of 28 May 2020, the government has identified the most vulnerable 10,000 students ('economically backward and displaced students, single parent, those with disabilities, landless farmers, and divorced parents, including students depending on Kidu') and is providing food under the Take-Home Ration Programme. Each student's rations include 12 kg of rice, 1.5 litres of cooking oil, 0.5 kg of chickpeas and 2 kg of pulses, altogether worth BTN 905 (about $12). The National School Feeding Programme is spending around BTN 9 million (some $120,000) on this project. These children are also provided with toiletries and menstrual hygiene supplies through UNICEF funding.

Through UNICEF support, 213 schools and 250 monastic institutions with 13,458 monks and nuns (12,168 monks and 1,290 nuns) and 51,352 (27,398 girls and 24,121 boys) school children across all 20 districts have received critical WASH supplies (including 50,000 bars of soap and 5,000 handwashing posters). Also through UNICEF support, WASH interventions are included in the Safe Schools Guidelines for school reopening during the COVID-19 pandemic. The total number of handwashing points has increased to 17,071 tap points (an increase of 77 per cent) from 9,654 tap points before the onset of the pandemic in early 2020.

Community participation

Formal consultation with parents was not carried out, possibly due to the requirement for a speedy response, but also because holding gatherings was not possible. During stakeholder interviews, one person commented that stakeholders initially felt that there was no risk to keeping schools open. This provoked discussion about the response as it was in the government's interest to keep schools open whereas the health response was leading towards school closure.

In some cases, members of the community have taken the initiative to support learners where they can. For example, one high school student saw children in her village struggling with the self-instructional materials and realized that teachers were unable to visit their remote village. She decided to support this small group of children herself to carry out the activities in the packs and help them to learn.[65]

Health and well-being

Counselling services were contactable through a free helpline. They provided advice and support on a range of issues affecting people during lockdown.

A number of toll-free helplines offering a range of counseling services were set up at regional and national levels in response to COVID-19.

Children with disabilities were granted a special government pass so that they could get outside during lockdown for a short time.

Finances

The main social protection measure adopted by the government is Druk Gyalpo's Relief Kidu. It is a social assistance measure which (by 6 June 2020) had been provided to 16,452 people for total value of BTN 184 million (about $2.5 million), BTN 7.2 million of which was allocated to children. Overall, 31,476 people applied for the Kidu of whom 22,225 were deemed eligible: 11,023 applications were from the tourism sector; transport and communications had 4,671 applicants; 5,298 were from other sectors (including restaurants, food services, personal and recreational). There were 775 applicants who were unemployed and unpaid. 67 per cent of the applicants are from the 25-34 age group (Yuden 2020).

The full amount of the Kidu is BTN 12,000 (about $160) per person per month. This is available to employees of affected businesses who were laid off, had reduced pay or were placed on unpaid leave; self-employed individuals in the tourism sector who lost their earnings; and Bhutanese workers who returned from abroad because of the pandemic and have no other source of income. The partial amount is BTN 8,000 per month (available to self-employed individuals in tourism-linked businesses and other businesses affected by social distancing, mandatory closures and curfews). An extra BTN 800 per child per month is granted to beneficiaries with children (disbursed in the first half of May after additional verification).[66] If the crisis continues beyond three months, the Kidu amount will be reduced to BTN 10,000, thereafter every three months the benefit will be reduced by another BTN 2,000 until it is phased out.[67]

Education system

Preparation for students due to take high-stakes exams was made a priority. There were more online lessons and broadcast hours devoted to Key Stages 4 and 5, and they are now the only Key Stages to return to school.

Measures were taken to support students in Classes X and XII who lived-in high-risk areas and they were moved to boarding schools in less risky areas so that their education could continue. These areas are discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.

Phase 2: Part of the reopening process

In consultation with multiple stakeholders (and influenced by the Framework for Re-opening of Schools developed by UNICEF, along with UNESCO, the World Bank, WFP and UNHCR) the MoE developed guidelines for the reopening of schools. In line with the country's holistic approach to education these guidelines covered many aspects of the return to school, including safety, health and well-being, psychosocial support and how to implement the prioritized curriculum. There are clear principles and procedures for each area, so that schools know exactly what to do. It also covers the situation where schools have to close again, and the adapted curriculum comes into use once more.

03

Thematic deep dive: Mitigating learning loss

As with other countries, Bhutan was not prepared for a pandemic. Its emergency planning prior to the outbreak of COVID-19 covered other major disasters such as earthquakes which required entirely different responses.

This section considers the challenge faced by government to mitigate learning loss for all children during the closure and reopening of schools, and the approaches taken to overcome these challenges.

3.1. The challenges

As with other countries, Bhutan was not prepared for a pandemic. Its emergency planning prior to the outbreak of COVID-19 covered other major disasters such as earthquakes which required entirely different responses.

Finding a response which reached all children and kept them learning was critical. During stakeholder interviews, teachers commented that their biggest challenge was keeping in contact with and supporting their students who had to learn in a different way. The development of materials and approaches needed to consider different groups of children for whom participation is more of a challenge and raised critical questions for the MoE planners:

- How to support children where there was less connectivity and places where parents found it more difficult or were unable to purchase supporting technology? With low literacy rates amongst the population, providing learning support for students so they could progress was essential if learning loss was to be minimized.
- How to support learning for children with a diverse range of disabilities and learning needs, requiring a more individualized response? For example, children with physical disabilities will have very different needs from children with Down's syndrome or children with hearing or visual impairments.
- How to support young children remotely who need to develop social and other skills reliant on close interaction? Young children are not independent learners and they need support and supervision. This support is unavailable in illiterate households, making them the least able to support the development of their children's reading and writing skills whilst they are at home. Illiterate households are likely to be amongst the most disadvantaged, so home-based learning will further increase disparities in learning outcomes and the risk of drop out.

In addition to ensuring the development of foundational skills, it was also critical for the country to protect students who were preparing for high-stakes exams and ensure that preparation could continue. These exams are critical for university entrance (at home and abroad), as well as to access jobs in Bhutan, all important for the future of the economy.

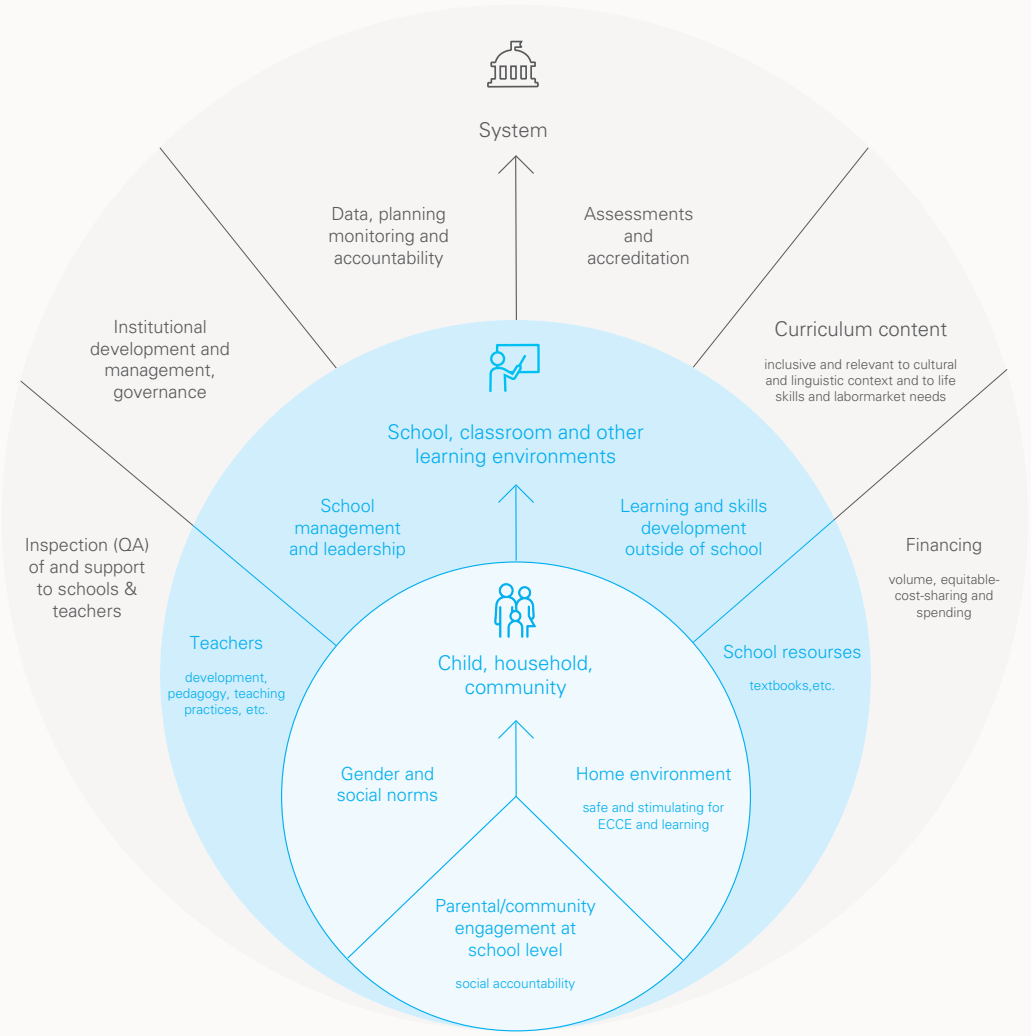
3.2. The response

This deep dive into mitigating learning loss analyses the measures that the MoE took and looks at what lessons can be learned from the experience.

UNESCO developed a conceptual framework (Figure 4)[68] which considers the factors necessary for an enabling learning environment. In mitigating learning loss these factors need to be taken into account to provide the optimum environment for learning, both during school closures and once schools reopen. This Chapter examines how far these critical elements were addressed during planning and implementation of the Education in Emergency response.

This Chapter is informed by both the desk study and stakeholder interviews. It shows how far Bhutan was able to address these factors to maximize learning for all students; it thus expands the brief discussion in Chapter 2.

FIGURE 4 | UNICEF'S CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT FOR LEARNING[69]



System

Planning

Whilst the pandemic "took the country by surprise"[70] the MoE were able to respond quickly to plan for mitigating against learning loss.

"There were several rounds of discussions and many wild ideas flowing... we were able to get a lot of support from the Minister and Prime Minister who reminded us about the mountain-top children."[71] – MoE official

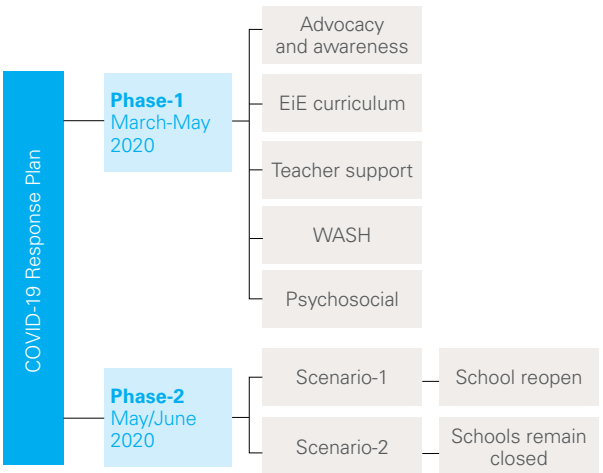
A two-phase education plan in response to school closures was developed.

1. Education in Emergency, Curriculum Implementation Guidelines, April 2020 (REC).
2. COVID-19 Response Plan Education in Emergency Phase II, April 2020 (MoE and multiple stakeholders).

Both these documents were produced quickly along with the Guidance for the Reopening of Schools in June 2020. They are all publicly available on the MoE website and were circulated to Dzongkhags and Thromdes for their information along with a series of supporting circulars,[72] keeping everyone informed.

The response needed to be swift and comprehensive. The MoE worked with the donor community, particularly UNICEF, to develop these plans. One stakeholder from the MoE commented that this was very positive process from which they had learnt a lot. As can be seen from Figure 5 the response presented scenarios for schools remaining closed and schools reopening and covered a range of areas including curriculum, teacher support and WASH.

FIGURE 5 | COVID-19 RESPONSE PLAN[73]



Financing

The EiE COVID-19 Response Plan provides budget plans to cover the whole COVID-19 response, including teacher preparation, development of video lessons and improvement of infrastructure, all of which will contribute to mitigating learning loss. The MoE received a grant of $750,000 from the Global Partnership for Education (GPE), channelled through Save the Children, to support activities identified in the emergency response. The application had four main components:[74]

Component 1: Supporting the adapted and prioritized EiE curriculum through the production of video lessons, provision of video conferencing equipment to support teachers online, production of self-study materials and guidelines supporting implementation.

Component 2: Strengthening WASH infrastructure in schools to enhance health and safety of children and staff, including upgrading pit toilets, providing safe drinking water in primary schools and provision of sanitary pads.

Component 3: Education continuity for children with disabilities**,** procurement of tablets and smartphones, data charges for three months and development of customized teaching and learning materials.

Component 4: Improved psychosocial support through support to Sherig (Education authorities), capacity development of counsellors in online counselling skills and techniques, procurement of video conferencing equipment and psychosocial training for focal teachers.

Data

The MoE publishes data collected annually at Dzongkhag level on many aspects (including enrolment, dropout, achievement, number of teachers trained and WASH facilities) in an Annual Statistics report. This data informed the response and was used in the development of the Education in Emergencies Plan.

The COVID-19 response required data on the number of students without access to TV or the internet. This data was used to estimate how many students needed to be provided with printed self-learning packs. The Policy and Planning Division gathered a huge amount of data about different aspects of school closures, reopening and provision which was presented in the Education in Emergency Phase II document.[75]

Monitoring and evaluation

During the early months of the response, the MoE carried out an online survey, aimed at teachers, students and parents. This gave a broad indication of the reaction to the provision for learning continuity during school closure. Although this was an optional survey and thus only reflected the views of self-selected people with interest and access to the internet, it provided an indication of what was happening amongst those who were using the materials provided. There were participants from every Dzongkhag, but Thimphu was by far the most well represented with 42 per cent of the respondents. The majority of the student participants were from the Key Stages 4 and 5.[76] This survey covered content, delivery, usefulness of videos, level of support received from teachers and parents. The feedback was generally positive from all groups who responded, although there were also critical comments which gave pointers for further improvement and development.

"Thought-provoking questions should be given at the end of every lesson."[77] –Teacher from Samtse

Whilst this perception survey was useful to give a broad picture from one section of users, it provided little information on the realities of children who have not had access to technology, have struggled with the self-instructional materials or have not engaged at all. It is therefore difficult to build up a clear picture of what the challenges are for these children. As yet there is no wider evaluation of participation and quality of inputs, or assessment of learning from a representative sample of the school population, although this is planned.[78]

"Government have monitored reach and recognize that they now need to monitor uptake."[79] – Department of Education stakeholder

The Guidelines for Reopening Schools provide a series of checklists for monitoring a wide range of aspects of school return. They include checking whether the schools received the relevant curriculum documents, had provided additional support for children at risk and with disabilities, and had carried out assessment to assess learning loss. This checklist is to be completed by school management and monitoring visitors to the school.

Curriculum

Subject coverage

The REC modified the curriculum to be delivered in two stages:

- Adapted curriculum, to be implemented whilst schools were closed
- Prioritized curriculum for schools that reopened before August 2020.[80]

The adapted curriculum for Key Stages 1 and 2 prioritizes the foundational skills of English (the medium of instruction), Dzongkha, and Mathematics (Table 3). At Key Stage 3 more subjects are added and some of the subjects combined. As the target learners get older, the range of subjects increases, reflecting the differing learning priorities for each age range and their ability to concentrate for different lengths of time.

If schools reopened before May 2020, the plan was for students at all Key Stages to follow a prioritized curriculum which reduced the curriculum load and provided teaching for the fundamental subjects. As schools were closed until February 2021, the prioritized curriculum is only detailed for the Key Stages 4 and 5 with the Key Stages 1–3 continuing with the adapted curriculum. The major difference between the adapted curriculum and the prioritized curriculum in Key Stage 4 is that subjects have been separated again rather than combined.

TABLE 3 | CURRICULUM SUBJECTS: PRE-COVID-19, ADAPTED AND PRIORITIZED VERSIONS

KEY STAGE	PRE-COVID-19 CURRICULUM	ADAPTED CURRICULUM SUBJECTS	PRIORITIZED CURRICULUM SUBJECTS
1 and 2 **Pre-primary – Class VI**	English Dzongkha, maths, arts, geography, ICT, technical and vocational education and training (TVET) [81] (integrated through other subjects), science, health and physical education	Dzongkha, English and maths	Classes will follow the adapted curriculum[82] on school reopening
3 **Classes VII & VIII**	English Dzongkha, maths, arts, geography, ICT, TVET, science, health and physical education, history	Dzongkha, English and Maths, general sciences, social sciences	Classes will follow the adapted curriculum on school reopening[83]
4 **Classes IX & X**	Dzongkha, English, maths, biology, physics, chemistry, environmental science, agriculture for food security, TVET, geography, history and civics, economics	Dzongkha, English and Maths, functional sciences, social sciences	Dzongkha, English, maths, biology, physics, chemistry, environmental science, agriculture for food security, TVET, geography, history and civics, economics
5 **Classes XI & XII**	English, Dzongkha for all,science, maths, physics, chemistry, biology, environmental science and ICT commerce, accountancy, commerce B, mathematics, TVET, agriculture for food security, media studies, arts, history, geography, economics B, mathematics, Rigzhung (culture and traditions)	Dzongkha, English and maths compulsory for all, then the full range of subjects in science, arts and commerce according to the courses students are taking	English, Dzongkha for all, science, maths, physics, chemistry, biology, environmental science and ICT commerce, accountancy, commerce B, maths, TVET, agriculture for food security, media studies, arts, history, geography, economics B, maths, Rigzhung

The demands of the examination syllabuses for the Bhutan Certificate of Secondary Education (BCSE) at Key Stage 4 and the Bhutan Higher Secondary Education Certificate at Key Stage 5 drove the emergency response for these age groups. There was an almost full range of subjects to ensure curriculum coverage for the critical national exams.

Content of each subject

The content of each subject from Key Stages 1–4 has been rationalized in different ways and pared down to the most fundamental concepts that learners need. For example, for Classes IX and X the content of physics, chemistry, biology and environmental science were compressed into 'functional sciences'. For Key Stage 1 the curriculums for Pre-primary to Class III were combined and the number of concepts within each subject reduced. An example of this was for number and operations in the National Curriculum where the key learning areas from across the age range were contracted into eight broad learning areas, which were covered by the videos and self-instructional materials (SIM) (see box).

Representing numbers

- Counting and identifying set to five and numerals
- Writing from 1-1000
- Use place value chart
- Meaning of subtraction and addition
- Division as repeated subtraction
- Adding and subtracting 2-digit numbers using various ways
- Using varieties of strategies to add
- Calculating change

This overall approach to the adapted curriculum is a pragmatic one which accepts that it is challenging to cover the whole curriculum. It is also better that children, particularly at younger ages, learn a small amount that is achievable with minimum support. It makes sense that children can concentrate on what is achievable at home without access to regular face-to-face contact. Some of this coverage will be repeated for children but in that case it will reinforce learning and potentially achieve the aim of "keeping students productively engaged at home."[84]

Once children return to school, the Guidelines for Reopening Schools recommended that the adapted curriculum continued. Since these guidelines were written in June 2020, the amount of time schools will have been

closed has significantly increased, so that students will have had almost a year away by the time they return. There are some general principles for all Key Stages, outlined in the document. Teachers are advised to use ICT to support teaching and to take time to plan so that students will meet the standards for the start of the next year. With school closures lasting longer than expected when these guidelines were developed, some of these key decisions around curriculum, promotion and retention will have to be revisited.

The other aspect to planning is that after a year away, many students will be anxious about returning to school. The younger ones will have to get used to being separated from family during the day again; older children may be worried about how they will cope with the demands of the curriculum after such a long period.

"Given the limited learning this year, my biggest concern is about repeating the same class."– Deki, aged 17, Class VIII student[85]

For students entering the two-year BCSE course these worries may be amplified as they feel the pressure to prepare for high-stakes exams, having missed a year of learning. One head teacher mentioned a boy in his school who was afraid to return because he had not been able to access online lessons, so was concerned that he would be left behind. For children with specific anxieties and troubles, they can be addressed through counselling services, but for the rest of the students the health and physical education curriculum can provide an opportunity to discuss worries and concerns, although it may need to be reviewed to ensure that mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) is sufficiently well integrated. These issues are recognized as important by the MoE which, as part of their guidelines for reopening schools, advocated a student-centred approach and requested that teachers spend time getting to know their students again, easing them back into school before starting curriculum-focussed work:

- Make education welcoming for students.
- Conduct a restorative programme on the first day (bonding, team building, foster informal links with community and within the school).
- Create an environment conducive to learning.
- Principals, teachers and support staff need to be more understanding, caring and supportive towards students and build good rapport.
- Teachers should be proactive and have positive expectations of the learners.[86]

The key challenge for the curriculum planners is what to do once schools reopen in February after learners have been out of school for almost a year. If children are promoted into the next class on return to school, as recommended in the Emergency in Education Phase II document, the teacher will not simply be able to start lessons at the level of the class the learners have moved into, because there is no guarantee that learners will have grasped the concepts taught through broadcast media and self-learning materials. The Guidelines for the Reopening of Schools recommends an orientation and planning session before school reopens, suggesting that a level of autonomy be given to the principal and teachers to plan for their school.

- Principals, teachers and support staff to plan a restorative programme before schools reopen.
- Discuss and become familiarized with the Adapted and the Prioritized Curriculum including the implementation guidelines.
- Develop academic plan individually before schools reopen.[87]

Whatever decisions are taken, the implementation of the assessment plans[88] will be critical to identify what children know and can do, so that learning areas can be prioritized both for immediate planning and in the longer term. Once school has started, teachers will carry out classroom assessments so they can plan the starting point for their class. Assessment opportunities are built into the adapted curriculum, and promotion in Key Stages 1–3 will depend on that assessment,[89] but the usefulness of those results in planning the prioritized curriculum will depend on how well the assessment has been recorded in each age range. In any case, not all children will have done the assessments.

A more general collection of evidence of learning at each Key Stage will be done to identify learning gaps and inform curriculum planners. The MoE can then decide how to compensate for any learning loss and strengthen approaches to distance learning in the future.

Schools, classrooms and other learning environments

Resources -adapted curriculum delivery mechanisms

The introduction to the REC Curriculum Implementation Guidelines describes the overarching approach to delivery. It includes using remote learning through broadcast and social media, including assessment activities and encouragement for lesson developers and presenters to make lessons "interactive, experiential and raise thought provoking questions."[90] A MoE official commented that the REC were aware that a single approach would not be enough to reach all students and that they needed to provide a variety of mechanisms for students to learn whilst at home.[91]

The main delivery mechanisms for the adapted curriculum are shown in Table 4.

TABLE 4 | ADAPTED CURRICULUM DELIVERY MECHANISMS

DELIVERY MECHANISMS	DATE STARTED	ACCESS AND AVAILABILITY
Video lessons	25 March 2020	BBS 2 Sherig YouTube (accessed through MoE website or YouTube) ELibrary Bhutan website Schedules appear on Sherig Facebook
Radio programmes	2 May 2020	BBS Kuzoo fm Schedules appear on Sherig Facebook
Self-learning printed materials	2 May 2020	Distributed by teachers to students identified as having no access to TV or internet
Interactive support from teachers	Circular sent out for teachers	WhatsAapp and other social media, Google classroom (for Classes IV and above)

The need to improve quality is high on the Bhutan education agenda. As part of this, in 2014 the MoE, with UNESCO support, developed plans to strengthen the use of ICT across the system to improve teaching and learning. The plan was in two stages – iSherig 1 (2014–2018) laid the foundations for ICT; and iSherig 2 (2019–2023) contained three areas of development: integration with teaching and learning, capacity development; and access.

iSherig-2 emphasizes the pervasive use of ICT in teaching and learning as clearly stated in its vision to make learners "nationally rooted and globally competent citizens through equitable and pervasive use of emerging and relevant technology." This "pervasiveness" is also evident in the projects and in the way learners, teachers and instructors are nudged to access electronic resources available on a platform using their knowledge and skills in digital pedagogy.[92]

COVID-19 may have accelerated this progress as the response to mitigating learning loss made use of technology wherever possible (through video, radio, Google classroom and mobile phones). Many teachers and students have become more confident in the use of IT.

"Until the schools closed due to the coronavirus pandemic scare, Deki (a 17-year-old Class 8 student) says she was never online and rarely used a cell phone. Today, she is on Facebook messenger, where six of her classmates have created a group to discuss and share lessons. Those who miss lessons on Google classroom, or the television catch up through the messenger group where one of them would have shared some photos of the lessons and the assignments."[93]

The focus on ICT in education over the past five years meant that there was already infrastructure – some of it at school level – which could be used to reach much of the school population. However, there was an awareness it would not be possible to rely on technology alone as there were 16,881[94] children with no access to TV or the internet.

Delivery mechanisms were set up remarkably quickly and by 26 April, just over one month after schools had closed, 440 lessons had been recorded by MoE in conjunction with Bhutan Film Association and iBEST using volunteer teachers.[95] Circulars from the Secretary of the MoE were sent to all Dzongkhags and Thromdes in early March, soon after schools had closed, telling them to set up Google classroom accounts for all students so that teachers could provide support to the learning from the video lessons. Self-instructional materials (SIM) were produced and distributed by teachers in early May.

As would be expected the video lessons differ in style according to the target age group, with lessons for Key Stage 1 using animated words and pictures surrounding the presenters. The teachers try to make the lessons interesting by asking questions, encouraging the students to think about what they are learning. Example videos of two English lessons aimed at different Key Stages can be found on YouTube: English Key Stage 1: Vegetables and Key Stage 4 English Lesson: How to approach a novel.

During stakeholder interviews one teacher commented that teachers needed to be more dynamic, moving away from 'chalk and talk' towards more modern ways of teaching. The videos were well planned, prepared and presented by volunteer teachers for whom this was a new experience, but in some cases they simply replicated the way they taught in the classroom. Feedback from students was varied, with praise for some aspects and criticism of others:

"All the presenters and the presentation are great but due to short time presenters have to rush on presenting and it's little hard to catch." – Class IX student

"Most teachers are using hard language, that's why we don't understand anything. It is good to use simple language then we can understand."[96] – Class IV student

Many teachers, particularly those in small schools, rarely get a chance to see others teaching. Watching video lessons gives teachers a unique opportunity to learn different techniques from each other, contributing to their professional development. As teachers become more confident with the medium and being in front of camera, they may be able to experiment with different approaches which optimise the potential of a video lesson and really engages the audience. This, in turn can have a positive influence on classroom practice.

Resources – self-instruction materials

These booklets were developed quickly by a task force set up for the purpose, comprising members of the Divisions of the Department of Education and 92 teachers,[97] and financed by MoE[98] and UNICEF. Each class has a separate booklet covering the subjects in the adapted curriculum. Except for Dzongkha, the booklets are in English, the language of instruction. They were distributed by teachers and ready for use in just over six weeks after schools closed in March 2020 and covered the same content as the TV video lessons; 198 radio lessons were made to supplement the materials.[99]

As part of normal classroom practice, students have a pupil handbook to supplement classroom teaching. They therefore have some familiarity with completing written exercises. The materials are reliant on someone being able to read the instructions and vocabulary in the booklets which, given the low levels of literacy, could be challenging for some students. The booklets were linked to a series of radio programmes, so for those children with radio this was one way of helping them through the booklets. The introduction to the materials acknowledges that Key Stage 1 children especially will find it very difficult to work through the materials alone and suggests ways of overcoming this:

"It is also acknowledged that the students of primary schools, especially students of classes pre-primary to III, and IV to VI may face certain challenges in using the SIMs. It is possible that certain instructions, content, and the activities may be difficult to understand due to the student's limited acquaintance with the medium of instructions and certain concepts covered in the learning activities. Therefore, it is imperative for family members and teachers staying in localities to provide necessary guidance to students at homes. The support from the following individuals can be of great help in student's self-engagement and learning through the use of SIMs."[100]

As mentioned above, not all children will have home support, but many teachers were keeping contact with the children as much as possible to help them learn.

The self-study materials are not differentiated, although students will work through them at their own pace. They give opportunities for students to self-check the answers so they can see how they are progressing.

Children with disabilities

Children with disabilities also received the self-instruction materials, which had been adapted and modified to suit their needs.[101] There are no details as to what these adaptions are.

The distance and inaccessibility of some communities, along with restrictions on movement, made it difficult for teachers to support children with disabilities. Schools for children with disabilities, supported by the government, mobilised resources to provide and distribute additional learning resources for children from residential schools. One stakeholder commented that a private company in Thimphu had provided tablets for children with hearing difficulties in two schools and some parents bought mobiles and tablets for their children, leading them to set up social media accounts such as Facebook and TikTok.[102] Teachers set up social media groups with parents to give them support during lockdown and provided a daily schedule of simple tasks for the children to complete (such as opening the curtains). Parents commented that they were able to see those small achievements and were proud of their children.[103]

One stakeholder commented that when toys were delivered the children were excited, but the novelty quickly wore off as parents didn't have the time to play with them. However, in some cases this increased children's independence as they learned to do many things on their own.[104]

ECCD children

The teachers used WeChat for the youngest children, and facilitators visited children once a week to give them much-needed face-to-face contact.[105]

Teachers

The role of teachers to support students' learning was clearly expressed in the Education in Emergencies Phase II document:

- Follow up with individual students and check their understanding.
- Conduct simple student assessments of their learning from SIM and radio lessons.
- Provide feedback to parents on the students' learning.
- Provide extended learning activities to support students' understanding, knowledge and skills.[106]

This was communicated to teachers through circulars to Dzongkhag offices. Teachers took their role in supporting students very seriously and, according to one stakeholder, many felt guilty about being at home and wanted to return to school.

Preparation of teachers for learning programmes: Teachers had some preparation for the shift to a different type of learning delivery. Six hundred teachers, one or two from each school, received training at the start of school closures on how to use Google classrooms so that they could support those students with access to the internet.[107]

Role of teachers during school closures and afterwards:[108]
Many teachers were proactive in encouraging learning during school closures. Although not mandated by the MoE, some teachers took their own initiative and were able to move from village to village, supporting children in small groups or as individuals in their homes. This was where the geography of the country was an advantage. In remote villages the natural barriers mean that it is possible to control entry, so everyone knew if there was a possibility of infection, making face-to-face contact relatively safe.[109] This approach was particularly necessary to support children with disabilities and ECCD children.

Mobile teachers

One teacher supported her early years students by visiting them every week and working with them in the presence of their parents. This gave her the opportunity to work one-to-one with children and reinforce concepts. She commented that this was her own initiative and that she felt it was safe because of the isolated and inaccessible nature of the village.

Child, household and community

Parental and community engagement

Stakeholder interviews revealed that teachers felt that there had been little parental support for students' learning:

"When we advise parents about the importance of education they nod."

One teacher described a home visit where she worked with a child whilst the parents sat and watched but made no comments.[110]

Parents and community could provide valuable support to children at home in many ways. Helping parents and community provide this support seems to be a gap in the response. Parents have been encouraged, and where possible have supported their children. For early years children there has been a parental package produced jointly by MoE and UNICEF which was distributed to 10,000 parents across 20 districts.[111] Other than that, there doesn't seem to be guidance or practical ideas for parents on how to help their children.

One teacher commented about parental support declining as school closures were extended for a longer period:

"Support from parents are declining daily. They say Google classroom costs them dearly, they are not able to monitor how children use their phone. They say children interest in BBS [Bhutan Broadcasting Service] lesson has gone down, most of them do not watch. Because of too many users, internet is very slow, it takes 10-15 minutes to upload/ download their assignment. Parents and students still have a concept that eLearning programme is for their engagement, thus neither students nor parents took it seriously. Now most of patents/students do not pick call from teachers."[112] –Teacher from Paro

Whilst this is only one anecdotal report, it suggests that parental engagement needs to be strengthened in some areas, so that parents have a good understanding of what the MoE is trying to do and are involved in both decision-making and supporting their children's education. At the same time, practical support for parents is important so that children can access resources and participate in learning.

3.3 Analysing the response

As described above, many initiatives have been taken to mitigate learning loss. The response strongly focused on finding different ways to support children to learn during school closures and was aimed at reaching as many students as possible. These measures are well documented, and a wealth of information is available on the MoE website. There is provision for students in remote areas and mechanisms are in place for learning support. There are mechanisms for formative and self-assessment in the self-instruction materials, but these are less apparent in the video lessons.

Whilst the plans and provision for the emergency response have been impressive, giving due consideration to the factors critical to providing support to all learners, it is difficult to get a sense of learner participation and achievement levels. It is also difficult to assess the actual support given by teachers and the level of involvement of parents and the community during the past eight months away from school. A significant amount of data was collected at the start of the pandemic and used to inform the emergency response, but evidence after that appears to be anecdotal rather than planned, systematic and rigorous. A systematic approach to monitoring and evaluation is essential so that the plans for returning to school and for the future are built on evidence of what has worked (and what hasn't), so that the learning needs of children are met.

Online learning was a platform for posting video lessons and for providing support by teachers through Google classroom. Given more time, there may be potential to explore how online learning could be used in a blended way, with software that supports more individualised learning in classrooms. This might enable a transition between learning at school and at home for those students with compatible devices. Although this could bring benefits, there is concern that introducing more ICT will lead to a digital divide between those children and students who have access and skills to learn from devices and those who don't. UNICEF's Guidance on Distance Learning Modalities[113] suggests ways in which the risks of widening the digital divide can be mitigated. This includes a focus on low- and no-tech alternatives (like TV, radio, SMS and printed materials) supported by schemes which provide

free internet and regular interaction between children and teachers. Preparation for parents and caregivers so they can give support, and for school leaders and teachers who have knowledge of the children they work with, backed up by an understanding of the context within which they are learning, are all essential elements of reaching all children and compensating for the digital divide.

"Approaches to reach the most marginalized children include rolling out low- and no-tech learning modalities, translating and adapting materials to a diverse set of mother tongues, closed captions and live signing interpretation in video/television lessons for children with hearing impairments, and ensuring materials are culturally appropriate and do not reinforce negative gender stereotypes."[114]

There has been a significant focus on hard-to-reach children, through provision of printed materials and teacher support, so the MoE clearly have these children in mind, and this focus on disadvantaged children comes through in all their plans. As stated at the start of the document, however, there will still be groups of children who have not been able to access any learning for the past year for the reasons described above. Further disaggregation of data would help to identify those children and specifically target them with a different type of provision, adapted to their needs.

04

Lessons learned

Whilst there was a significant focus on making provision for hard-to-reach children, it was felt that there could have been more provision for children with disabilities. Inclusion of organizations working with people with disabilities in the development of strategies and polices, and consultation with parents of children with disabilities would have helped meet their needs more effectively.

4.1. Lessons learned

These have been identified through reflection on the available literature and interviews with key stakeholders.

To keep children learning there needs to be a **comprehensive approach, focussed on learning** which provides teacher support, a modified curriculum and a variety of delivery mechanisms. Most children can be reached using this range of measures. However, there are still some children who will not have participated in any learning and will need specific targeting to break down barriers to learning.

Whilst there was a significant focus on making provision for hard-to-reach children, it was felt that there could have been **more provision for children with disabilities.** Inclusion of organizations working with people with disabilities in the development of strategies and polices, and consultation with parents of children with disabilities would have helped meet their needs more effectively.

Traditional teaching methods hamper a teacher's ability to be flexible and adaptable, whereas this type of response requires just such qualities. Teachers needed the ability to use a variety of teaching methods to make remote learning interesting and to support learners.

Planning based on data was critical to the response. The MoE produced very detailed plans and communicated them through their website and the Dzongkhags, so that there was consistency in approach. These **plans were redundant treated as working documents which were adapted as necessary** to respond to the changing situation.

As with most countries, the Bhutanese system was not ready for such an emergency. **Forward planning and preparation** including teacher training, school hygiene and building student familiarity with ICT could have made it easier to provide a response. Learning from this experience and taking appropriate action is essential, as measures put in place now will help face similar emergencies in the future.

Working together is a strong model to blend different knowledge and experiences. Although the COVID-19 pandemic was an international emergency with many challenges, it also provided an opportunity to for the MoE to cooperate with education agencies and donor partners who work in Bhutan. Leadership from the MoE is paramount in this process.

The response put health at the forefront, in line with the way Bhutan works. Given the nature and size of the country with many remote and inaccessible areas, there could have been **a more localised approach** so that some schools could have remained open without putting lives in danger, for example in areas where movement in and out is challenging.

The **curriculum needs to be flexible** to allow for significantly different levels of learning on return to school, both in classes and in different areas of the curriculum.

"Remediation combined with long-term reorientation of instruction to align with children's learning levels fully mitigates the long-term learning loss due to the shock and surpasses the learning in the counterfactual of no shock by more than a full year's worth of learning."[115]

4.2. Recommendations

Bhutan's MoE has many plans for the future of education as a result of the lessons learned from this situation. The recommendations below have been developed from a desk study of key documents and discussions with stakeholders from the MoE, teachers and representatives of organizations for children with disabilities. They align with national plans and the lessons learned from the pandemic already in place and make suggestions to develop those plans further.

Recommendation 1: Monitoring and evaluation

A. Monitor and evaluate the response to inform future planning

This recommendation calls for an assessment of the current real-time monitoring capacity in order to identify gaps. To fully track implementation of the response, more regular data is needed on attendance (to combat drop-out), learning outcomes (to assess learning loss and adjust remediation strategies) and school implementation of standard operating procedures for safe reopening (so there is a need to regularly check compliance of schools with national standards).

- Use the MoE data collecting systems to produce data that will help understand the success of the response programme in terms of participation and to learn lessons for the future.
- Collect data on the reach of various learning modalities, including levels of participation in TV broadcast lessons, use of self-instruction materials, and levels and quality of teacher support (Google classroom and personal contact).
- Collect data on the effectiveness of distance learning e.g., back-to-school assessments, to get a picture of the levels of learning and the gaps in knowledge and skills at all ages.
- Collect disaggregated data by gender, age, disability status and down to Dzonghag and individual school level to allow a nuanced identification of need and enable targeting of inputs and resources. Ensure disaggregation of monitoring and surveillance data by disability, using the Washington Group Short Set of Disability Questions and the Washington Group UNICEF Child Functioning Module.[116]

B. Use data to plan specifically for hard-to-reach children

As mentioned above, many of the hardest-to-reach children who face significant barriers to learning are likely to have missed out on a year of schooling. Addressing this issue through planning should help them access learning in the future.

- Evaluate the COVID-19 response with specific reference to hard-to-reach children in the remotest communities; use learning assessments, community surveys and teacher interviews to identify the barriers faced by students trying to access remote learning.
- Use the findings from the evaluation, along with international evidence of what works to inform the development of targeted plans for these children and allocate resources to reach them with the currently most appropriate method of learning in their context; form longer-term plans to expand connectivity so that all children can be reached by online learning modalities in the future.

Recommendation 2: Build on the student-centred approach adopted during the pandemic and use it as a springboard to strengthen teaching and learning

- Use data collected to inform a curriculum adaptation in the mid-term review: by explicitly building in learning progression and competency acquisition within the curriculum, it will be easier for teachers to map each learner to their true level, for each subject. From there, using 'learning ladders' built into the curriculum, teachers should be able to support each child to move up the learning ladder at their own pace. Assessment for learnings are used in classrooms to check on each child's progress.
- Prioritise essential curriculum content underpinned by pedagogy that addresses learning needs and is aligned to the nature of Bhutanese society and the way children learn best.
- Give teachers the flexibility to modify the pace of the curriculum so that they can meet the learning needs of children, prioritising the solid acquisition of foundational learning above completing the official textbook.
- Strengthen the MHPSS curriculum so that it is woven into the fabric of the school and into approaches to teaching which encourage empathy, discussion, problem-solving and openness.
- Use lessons learned from the experience of distance learning to consider how ICT could be integrated into the education system to support and strengthen the curriculum. Build this thinking into the iSherig 2 plans (e.g., software for independent learning, radio and TV for inputs, mobile technology for support and learning, use of the internet to provide examples, software to support assessment).
- Support alternative parallel learning systems for out-of-school children and future disruptions: the type of alternative model will depend on what works best to reach the maximum number of children at the teaching location. Ensure that the alternative teaching and learning modalities put in place in response to the pandemic are accessible to children with disabilities, children of minority ethnic languages and any other disadvantaged students.

- Develop ICT literacy for students, teachers and the school community, based on a planned expansion and roll-out of online learning options in education. Seek solutions that use locally available technology (e.g., mobiles which have a high coverage) whilst infrastructure is being developed.
- Plan how community and parental support can be strengthened to improve local support mechanisms for learning, health and well-being, particularly in communities that are inaccessible by road.
- Use local knowledge to understand the extent to which parents can and want to be involved in supporting learning, and the barriers to that involvement. Build on findings to strengthen communication with and support for all parents so they are better equipped to support their child's learning.

Recommendation 3: Prepare teachers to play a different role in teaching

- Support teachers with and train them in initial diagnostic assessment: analysis of results and learning gaps with a focus on foundational skills in primary school, linked to age-related behaviour and cognitive capacity. Use these assessments to revise teaching and learning plans to incorporate strategies such as teaching at the right level, multi-grade teaching for small remote schools and remedial teaching to mitigate learning loss accumulated during school closures. Consider the elements of the Teaching at the Right Level [117] Programme and how they might be applicable for Bhutan schools.
- Train teachers on giving specific support to girls, children with disabilities, linguistic minorities, children of migrants, refugees or internally displaced children, as relevant locally.
- Design and roll out training on health, mental health and psychosocial support; infection prevention and control; and water, sanitation and hygiene standard operating procedures in schools.
- Develop skills such as coaching and mentoring (both in person and remotely) through mobile technology and Google classroom to keep in touch with students and provide individualised learning support.
- Develop teachers' digital literacy skills so they can support online teaching and learning approaches, and use software for various education purposes (such as assessment) to leverage the potential of technology for learning.
- Support the development of peer-to-peer support mechanisms: identify teacher mentors, site moderators and content reviewers so that all teachers can access relevant and contextual support and content from experts within their own profession. Content would include lesson plans, activities to engage children, teaching materials, sample test questions and online teacher support. Exchange platforms are the future: they can increase the immediate applicability of training and make it more likely that actual changes are seen in classroom teaching, whether physical or virtual.
- Review models of teacher training and consider how they could be delivered remotely. Programmes such as English in Action in Bangladesh[118] use offline mobile videos for teacher professional development and could be adapted for use in Bhutan to reduce the need to travel to events.

Recommendation 4: Strengthen planning and implementation for children with disabilities so that the system is able to meet their needs in a variety of settings

Supporting organizations working with people with disabilities to:

- Assess all students on their return to school and use the assessment results to plan remedial and catch-up programmes when necessary. Develop and implement **disability-inclusive education programmes and schools** through inclusive teacher pedagogy, accessible facilities, assistive devices and classroom assistance, as well as revised learning materials and assessment protocols that are adapted and adjusted to the needs of students with disabilities.
- **Establish cash transfers (incentives)** to parents and caretakers for sending children with disabilities to school or providing alternate means of learning.
- Design and implement **disability-focused early childhood intervention** policies and practices through early diagnosis, referral and treatment. Build in provision for children with disabilities for future emergency plans' continuity of learning, targeting those who live in or have to return to remote communities.
- **Provide advice and solutions for learners** with special needs, ensuring that learning materials and platforms are accessible for children with disabilities and are translated into most common languages/dialects.

- **Assess district-level capacity to provide essential services to children with disabilities** and consider different ways in which professional support could be provided to such children in remote areas. Build capacity and enhance knowledge of government officials and stakeholders on **assistive technologies** for learning.
- Promote **advocacy and education programmes** about delays and disabilities for parents and other caregivers. Build parental involvement in children's learning during school closures and provide support programmes for parents and community to help them manage the different needs of their children at home. This may be something as straightforward as teaching sign language to communities.
- **Review teacher training to ensure that inclusion is integrated** into all aspects of the training curriculum, so that teachers are prepared to meet the needs of children with disabilities in general classes.
- **Identify the practical support and resources (human and other) teachers and schools** would need to enable the integration of children with disabilities into mainstream schools in line with the goals of the Draft National Education Plan. Consider if and how in the long term this goal could be achievable.

Useful reference documents on supporting children with disabilities: https://www.washingtongroup-disability.com/question-sets/

4.3. Conclusion

The original objectives of the case studies for this rapid Situation Analysis were:

- To assess and estimate the various impacts of the COVID-19 epidemic on the education sector and stakeholders (children, adolescents, teachers, parents, education officials etc.) in Asia (East, Southeast and South Asia sub-regions;
- To identify examples of promising responses and strategies in education and associated social sectors which can be shared with other countries.

Assess and estimate the various impacts of the COVID-19 epidemic on the education sector

The effects of the pandemic on children encompass various aspects of their growth and development. Learning time has decreased and disparities in access to alternative methods of education during lockdown has led to an uneven level of learning loss for most children. Alongside potential learning loss, the health impact has detrimentally affected many young children at a critical stage of their development. Anxiety levels have increased amongst the population as a whole as household incomes have fallen with the slowing of economic growth and the increase in unemployment.

Identify examples of promising responses and strategies in education and associated social sectors which can be shared with other countries

Bhutan was very clear about priorities during the pandemic – the health and well-being of its citizens were paramount. Schools were closed and lockdown was put into operation as soon as the first community transmission was identified.

An important strength is the way that Bhutan was able to take advantage of existing structures to plan and implement a response. Mechanisms already in place were built upon and some (such as ICT) accelerated overall progress. Social protection mechanisms were extended to ease the financial impact on the poorest families. The counselling service was quickly adapted so that people could access it if they had worries or concerns. Strong mechanisms and systems can make a country more resilient and minimise the impact of any future shocks.

The MoE was able to use existing data to help plan the response, consider how to reach all children and support them to continue learning. Working with stakeholders, the curriculum was adapted and an emergency response developed within a few months of the first case; funding to support the response was also secured.

The adapted curriculum was delivered using a variety of existing mechanisms and was rolled out quickly once schools were closed. The aim was to minimise the impact on children and keep them occupied. As with many other countries the response mostly involved the use of technology. IT infrastructure already in place enabled some of the population to participate in online learning and lessons broadcast on the national BBS station. These were backed up by a set of self-learning materials for those without access, delivered by local administration mechanisms.

Whilst it is apparent that most children were reached with at least one of the alternative methods, there was not enough information about participation and learning to enable the MoE and teachers to know whether their strategy was effective or whether it needed adjustment.

Schools need to be reopened and all children brought back into school safely to have that essential face-to-face contact with teachers. Being in a classroom with a teacher will start to help children to learn again. Plans need to be made for a formative assessment for all children, and the results should be used to inform accelerated learning and remediation strategies so that children are being taught at the level they have reached.

Whilst Bhutan's response to the pandemic was comprehensive and wide-ranging, which minimized the impact, schools remained closed for almost a year. Schools and teachers have a responsibility to support children to make the transition from home-based learning back to the classroom. This has wider implications than just supporting children to catch up with what they have missed. School reopening plans cover a range of aspects and it will be essential that teachers and head teachers implement those plans so that the return is as smooth as possible.

There is still work to do to make up the potential learning deficit. Part of this is careful short-, medium- and long-term planning to build on the lessons learned from pandemic response. This learning has the potential both to improve the quality of teaching and learning and to put the country in a stronger position to face future emergencies.

Annex

Key stakeholders interviewed

Kinley Gyeltshen, Officiating Director, General School Planning and Coordination Division, MoE

Dochu, Chief Planning Officer, Policy and Planning Division, MoE

Wangpo Tenzin, Dean and Curriculum Developer, Royal Education Council

Karma Jigme Lepcha, Subject Coordinator, Bhutan Council for School Examinations and Assessment

Tashi Lhamo, Chief Programme Officer, Teacher Professional Development Programme, MoE

Sangay Chophel D, Chief, Education Management Development, MoE

Karma Wangchuk, Chief Programme Officer, School Health and Nutrition Division, MoE

Reena Thapa, Chief Counsellor, Career Education and Counselling Division, MoE

Tsheringla, Principal Daga Central School, Dagana (Urban)

Deki Wangmo, Cluster Lead Teacher Sonamgang Middle Secondary School, Phuentsholing (Urban)

Samdrup Gyalpo, Principal Sakten Lower Secondary School, Trashigang (Rural)

Tashi Dema, Teacher Gomphu Lower Secondary School, Zhemgang (Rural)

Sherab Phuntshok, Chief Programme Officer Early Childhood Care and Development & Special Educational Needs Division, MoE

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Case Study

Situation Analysis on the Effects of and Responses to COVID-19 on the Education Sector in Asia

This report reviews the impacts of and responses to COVID-19 on education in Bhutan, provides reflections on lessons learned so far in Bhutan's COVID-19 response, and analyzes capacity gaps for recovery. It explores successful elements of the Government response, issues and challenges faced, and strategies adopted to continue students' learning during school closures. It also looks to the future, in building back better and increasing the resilience of the education system to future shocks.

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