

**The Prime Minister's Statement at the 'Regional Seminar on Inclusive  
Education with focus on Children with Disabilities.  
December 3, 2013**

Lam Neten of Paro, Dasho Vice Chancellor, Hon'ble Parliamentarians, Madam Education Secretary, Representative of UNICEF, Officials of UNICEF, Australian Government, Participants of this workshop, Dasho Dzongdag of Paro, Dasho Drangpoen, Director General and Staff of Paro College of Education.

I wish you a very happy International Day of Persons with Disabilities. What better way to celebrate this very important day than to hold this seminar, a seminar on inclusive education, focusing on children with disabilities.

I want to congratulate Paro College of Education, Ministry of Education and UNICEF Bhutan for organizing this very important workshop, this important seminar. I came to learn and learn I did. Our previous speakers have provided us with a wealth of knowledge. There is not much left in my address that I can cover. What has needed to be said, to spearhead this workshop, have been very articulately presented by capable speakers.

I will share some of my personal experiences.

Bhutan is a very close society, our families are very close, and our societies are very close. We live in extended families, where everybody takes care of everybody. In such an environment, persons with disabilities benefit, because they are not ostracized, they are loved. They are not excluded; they are included within their families. But that love can also be suffocating, because that love translates to an overbearing care of people with disabilities. That love, that very love that we shower upon all our family members, to all members of our society and person with disabilities and because of our compassion which prevents persons with disabilities toward venturing out into the world and fulfilling their potential.

Few years ago, I went to my village and I met my cousin Pema Dorji, who was 10 years then. He was loved by his family and he was very a happy boy. His family had decided that they would dedicate their lives in taking care of their child. I suggested that perhaps they could send Pema to Khaling, where there is a school for the visually impaired that Dasho Pema mentioned. They reluctantly agreed. Twelve years later, last year, I received a message on facebook. It was somebody, it was from somebody called Pema Dorji and he identified himself as my cousin. He said he was pursuing a degree in India, Bangalore, and he wrote to thank me for sending him to school. I haven't done anything. All I had to do was to suggest Pema's parents to use the resources that were available within the country. We are truly blessed with the succession of wise compassionate monarchs. They have

ensured that now every child should be in school, is in school and they have not left persons with disabilities out of the education system.

In 2009, I visited a friend's house. He had an adopted daughter. He adopted this girl because she was unhappy in her village. She was unhappy because she couldn't hear, and because she couldn't hear, she was mute and people in her village called her a fool, called her dumb. I suggested that she's not a fool and that there is a school in Paro, Drugyel and that they have an education program for the hearing impaired. Her foster parents very extremely happy and they sent her to the school. The principal of Drugyel Junior School accepted her whole-heartedly. Today, Sonam Seldon teaches her parents sign language. She is reading, she is writing and she is able to express both, her beauty within and her potential.

In 1998, Pema Chogyel graduated from school for the visually impaired in Khaling. He had finished high school and I happened to meet him. He said he wanted to go to Sherubtse College. That was a very ambitious goal, because no blind student had gone to Sherubtse College. He said he wanted to study English and major in English Honors.

I visited the Director of Sherubtse College, who today is the Vice Chancellor of the Royal University of Bhutan and I requested him to consider admitting Pema Chogyel in Sherubtse. He agreed and he didn't look fearful as he mentioned in his address. He looked very optimistic. We approached UNICEF and UNICEF Bhutan provided some basic equipment, including tape recorders, batteries and cassettes. Those were the days. Pema Chogyel graduated with flying colors, worked in BBS for a while, worked with UNDP and today is a Program Officer in Ministry of Education looking after Special Education.

In 2004, on a tour to eastern Bhutan, I happened to be with none other than the Vice Chancellor. At that time, we were with Her Majesty the Queen Mother, Ashi Tshering Pem Wangchuck. A young man stopped Her Majesty the Queen Mother and said he wanted to study. The young man couldn't speak, couldn't walk and was on the ground by the road. He was screaming at his grandfather to speak on his behalf. His parents had left him with his grandfather. His grandfather explained to Her Majesty the Queen Mother that Pema wanted to go to school and by then he was already about 23 years old. Her Majesty the Queen Mother recommended that he get enrolled in a vocational training institute. Pema joined the Institute for Traditional Arts and Crafts in Thimphu. He could use his leg, one leg though while his other leg was useless and both his hands couldn't be used as well. But he could use whatever he had. He could write, he had learnt on his own and he could speak. I thought that we could make him paint and sell simple paintings. Was I wrong. He chose to be a carver. He said he wanted to carve, and today he makes some of the most beautiful carvings. Traditional Bhutanese carvings demand accuracy,

strength, and patience and Pema is a carver. That young man, Pema Tshering, is a wonder like Madam Nilofer mentioned a while earlier.

Ladies and gentlemen, I have come across a few other very able disabled people and I know that those who are here have come across many more, and they would have perhaps touched your lives more profoundly than those I have had the honor to encounter. They have touched my life and they have convinced me that they are able. They want an opportunity, they want access to education and they want inclusive education. But access to education alone is not inclusive education; more important is the quality of education. We must ensure that every child, whom we educate have access to quality education and that is even more so for children with disabilities. So I call on this seminar to consider ways of expanding access, of guaranteeing access to all the children but especially children with disabilities and more importantly, insuring that with access comes quality of education. Access alone does not constitute inclusive education. We must be prepared to ensure that children with disabilities that we educate have the foundations to enjoy a lifelong education. We must ensure that our children with disabilities can fulfill their potential and become productive members of our society by engaging in gainful employment. Otherwise, we risk short-changing not just our children with disabilities but shortchanging our society because if we don't have quality education, we will not produce Dr. Sanga, Bhutan's best physiotherapist. We will not produce Gembo, an entrepreneur who is visually impaired. We will not have Lopen Kezang and Duptho, some of our best singers and entertainers, and we will not have people like Pema Chogyel and Pema Tshering and many other visually impaired educators here.

Bhutan has come a long way. Our journey in education has been highlighted by many successes including special education. But, we have a long way to go. We need to understand, we need to have a clear understanding of the numbers of disabled people who live in Bhutan and we need to ensure that we as a society, all of us together are able to provide each and every one of them quality education that our constitution guarantees them. Our Royal Family have done so much to expand special education in Bhutan. His Royal Highness Prince Namgyel Wangchuck, the Paro Penlop who started education for the visually impaired in the 1970s, His Majesty the Fourth Druk Gyalpo who have commanded that every disabled person should have the means and should be provided with means to enjoy a life of meaningful employment. His Majesty the King who has commanded that each and every disabled child and disabled person must be provided with equal but more attention than other children.

Ladies and Gentleman, in Bhutan we have enough support, but we have a lot to do and we can if we join forces. December 3, the International Day for Persons with Disabilities and as I said earlier, what better way to celebrate this important day

than to hold this seminar here in Paro, a seminar during which we can celebrate not just the potential but the accomplishments of our disabled brothers and sisters. A seminar during which we can share experiences, where we can discuss and where we can plan ahead to ensure that none of our disabled brothers and sisters will be left out, and to ensure that they will have access to inclusive education like the rest of Bhutan.

I wish all the participants of this important seminar a very successful deliberation. On our part, we look forward to receiving your recommendations for we will take each and every one of them very seriously. Thank you and Tashi Delek.