

Educating for Gross National Happiness: A New Paradigm for Education in Bhutan

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It is generally assumed that people from all walks of life want happiness. Human beings have aspired to live a happy life since time immemorial. Brooks (2008) cited Socrates, an ancient Greek philosopher, who once asked his students, “Do not all men desire happiness? One of the students answered: There is no one who does not” (p. 1). Similarly, Aristotle stated that “Happiness is the meaning and purpose of life, the whole aim and end of human existence” (Kesebir & Diener, 2008, p. 69).

It is interesting to see the wisdom of Socrates and Aristotle expressed more than 2000 years ago echoed today. Since happiness is a fundamental human quest, many countries have introduced happiness and well-being as measurable assets and explicit goals to supplement Gross Domestic Product (Ahmed, 2010). Bhutan is one nation that has focused public policies on the happiness and well-being of its citizens by adopting a new development philosophy called Gross National Happiness (GNH). In 1972, Bhutan’s fourth king Jigme Singye Wangchuck declared: “Gross National Happiness is more important than Gross National Product” (Hayward & Colman, 2010, p. 5). To achieve GNH, government development policy

is based on four pillars: sustainable development, preservation and promotion of culture, conservation of the environment, and good governance. To measure progress according to these pillars, Bhutan adopted a development index in 2008 to “reflect GNH values, set bench marks, and track policies and performance of the country” (Ura, 2008, p. 1). This index consists of nine domains: psychological well-being, time use, community vitality, culture, health, education, environmental diversity, living standard, and governance.

Education is the GNH domain that receives the most attention in Bhutan. In the words of Bhutan’s first democratically elected Prime Minister, Jigmi Yoser Thinley: “We have identified education as the glue that holds the whole enterprise together” (Hayward & Colman, 2010, p. 14). In 2009, the Bhutan Ministry of Education launched a nation-wide reform initiative called *Educating for Gross National Happiness*. This initiative brought two major changes to Bhutan’s education system. The first change was to the curriculum: GNH principles and values were infused in the school curriculum at all levels. This included emphasis on deep critical and creative thinking, ecological literacy, practice of the country’s profound ancient wisdom and culture, contemplative learning, a holistic understanding of the world, genuine care for nature and for others, competency to deal effectively with the modern world, preparation for right livelihood, and informed civic engagement (Hayward & Colman, 2010). Teachers are required to infuse GNH values into their daily teaching activities. For example, when teaching about life-giving elements such as air, water, fire, and soil, teachers instruct students to give due care and protection to these elements because destroying them leads to destruction of our lives. GNH curriculum not only discusses values as content in the subject

areas but also makes sure that such values are appreciated and practised in daily life.

The second change intended to realize the overall objective of educating for GNH was the adoption of *Green Schools for Green Bhutan*. Green schools were created to nurture and shape a child's development in the school system through eight greenery dimensions: environmental, intellectual, academic, social, cultural, spiritual, aesthetic, and moral (Bhutan Ministry of Education, 2012). In addition to these eight dimensions, there are other important elements of a green school. One important element of a green school is that it takes care to build and promote good relationships with the parents and community, making them actively involved in the education of their children. Inclusive education is another area of focus for a green school as it ensures that all the children in the community receive equal educational opportunities and are treated fairly. A green school serves the special educational needs of children with physical disabilities, including visual and hearing impairments. A green school also looks after the basic needs of children, ensuring that they are safe in the school and monitoring and maintaining each individual's personal health, hygiene, and growth. Above all, a green school creates an atmosphere that provides respect, care, warmth, and delight in the school. Teachers and students treat each other fairly and value everyone's uniqueness and contributions to school improvement.

Since the launch of *Educating for GNH*, school programs and improvement plans, including goals, expectations, and practices, have been infused with GNH principles and values. GNH-based curriculum is more enjoyable and relevant for students while the green school concept addresses the physical

and psychosocial climate of schools. In the early years of this reform, there are reports of enhanced principal leadership and improved student behaviour and regard for culture, tradition, and nature (Bhutan Ministry of Education, 2012). Educating for GNH offers an intriguing approach to public education within a unified national framework. In education, we do not see the full result of what we sow until decades into the future, but this holistic approach could be beneficial to the wellness of students in Bhutan and beyond.

References

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