

## Looking at Education in Bhutan: a View from Afar

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I first worked in Bhutan in 1997 for the then Department of Education and have joined others in marvelling at the progress that has been made. Working alongside educators in the Ministry of Education and the two education colleges has been a privilege. Welcoming many Bhutanese to the University of New England in Armidale has been part of the continuing story of development of Bhutanese education. We learned a lot from the batches of multi-grade teachers and the many post-grads who had been with us over the years and I think that we were able to contribute ideas and practices. But there is still much to be done.

Much of what follows takes its ideas from the writers in the book that Matthew Schuelka and I edited in 2016<sup>1</sup>. There are four sections, each of which addresses a key issue that is forward looking, and that intends to empower education in the longer term.

### **Educating for GNH Initiative**

This is the key. GNH is the goal and Educating for GNH is the guide. Yet, the greatest challenge facing the secular education system is the integration of Educating for GNH into everyday teaching. It has been claimed that teachers do not know how to do it. It may be a good idea to have an additional subject in the school curriculum, such as The Universal Human Values Education (UHVE), but the strongest way forward to Educating for GNH is to focus upon learning, not teaching. Educating for GNH is all about learning from the hidden curriculum. If you are not familiar with this term, then you will understand immediately because it is the kind of learning that takes place “at your mother’s knee”, as we say where I come from. It is tacit learning if you like.

If you are mindful of GNH, then the hidden curriculum empowers you to educate for GNH. This is a simple idea because teachers already teach through the hidden curriculum by what they do and say. If they show respect, their students observe this. If they treat their students in a sexist manner, their students observe this. If they show genuine understanding, so too will their students observe this. In other words, learning takes place, not by direct teaching, but indirectly, by “being there”.

Acts of respect, caring, honesty, kindness, compassion, gratitude, equality and empathy are noticed by students and teachers alike. Moreover, it takes seconds to commend a person for such acts. Many, if not all, parents teach their children using this approach. This means that Educating for GNH can be a part of many lessons, even maths lessons, where those in the classroom act according to the principles and values of GNH. Bhutan has already seen the benefits of teaching GNH ideas through many extra-curricular programmes (ECPs), although these ECPs are not equally available across the school population. One implication is that teachers need to be mindful of what they do and say.

Continuing capacity building in Educating for GNH, and the understanding of the importance of the hidden curriculum alongside leadership at systemic and school levels, means that change will happen, although it will take time. More work in schools and at the pre-service level is required if Educating for GNH is to be successful in the long-term rather than being looked back on as an unsuccessful slogan of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

A more controversial suggestion is for GNH principles and values to be tested, formally. We know that formal testing, currently, motivates the majority of the teachers. What is more, testing assumes that what is tested is important. GNH principles and values are at the core of education. They can be tested formally. The effects of summative testing, especially when conducted at the national level, is so pervasive and seen to be so important that the term “teaching to the test” can be applied to many classrooms in Bhutan. Educating for GNH can use this to its advantage. Unfortunately, the focus upon national testing has led to spoon feeding in some classrooms such that independent learning at university is hindered.

There are some related issues. Summative testing is important but it does not help day-to-day learning because it occurs after the learning has taken place. Formative and diagnostic assessments (testing/evaluation) are also important. The former is a tool used by teachers to ensure that students are learning during the process of learning. It is separate from the summative, formal assessment system. Formative evaluation can be done simply, for example, by watching the students to see what their expressions are as they are learning. Or, students can work in small groups and talk about what has just been presented. The teacher observes and intercedes as required.

On the other hand, diagnostic evaluation in the classroom finds out the level of learning of the students before a learning sequence. This is particularly important in a new topic but also when the class is new to the teacher or when the previous lesson's learning is quickly tested, perhaps by oral questioning. Diagnostic evaluation assumes that the students are at different levels of learning and that the learning is sequenced differently for different students. Both diagnostic and formative evaluation are consistent with the idea of student-centred learning. In particular, formative-assessment - when the teacher is mindful of the process of learning and interacts with the students and checks himself/herself as necessary - is essential for Educating for GNH.

Parents and teachers are in partnership when it comes to children's learning. This is the second issue. Such a partnership is more obvious at the early childhood level (< 5years) but is no less important elsewhere. Acknowledging this partnership implies the breaking down of a culture of parental exclusion from schools. Leadership is required here. Both teachers and parents are essentially involved in Educating for GNH. Why not work together as part of policy and practice?

Another issue is the breaking down of cultural inequities. This is clearly stated in the GNH principles and values. Take one important area of inequity - sexist practices are evident at all levels of schooling especially in higher secondary school and in the tertiary sector. Changes are needed at the institutional, policy, and practice levels such that these become consistent with national policies.

## Capacity Building

If Educating for GNH is to be successful, many teachers need to change. Changing people's ways of doing things is difficult and takes time. We know from past experience that one-shot in-service capacity building is largely a waste of time and money. By "one-shot" I mean a course where people are removed from where they work and taught about something. Even the four-day training programme, that already exists for teachers to integrate GNH values into different subjects of the present curriculum, will be unsuccessful if it is not followed up. Follow up is achieved via pressure and support. Pressure is exerted, for example, through supervisors identifying the policy and requiring it to be demonstrated. The Performance School document provides the basis for the supervisors for this task. The Education Monitoring Supervisory Division needs to continue with its pressure by visiting schools as it did in the early years of the initiative.

Support is provided through having the materials that are required, having time to try it out and making mistakes and having colleagues to talk to to share ideas as well as successes and failures. Psychological support is necessary. A little praise goes a long way, especially when trying something new. Reiteration of the main ideas, and how to do them, is usually required. A current example of the on-going need for capacity building is in the area of educating the disabled. The new policy of inclusion of children with disabilities into regular schools is a demanding, but necessary, policy. In-service education for inclusion is necessary to prepare the current teachers for the new policy and should be a series of practical learnings over time rather than the less effective, one-off events. Pre-service education requires attention, such that new courses are devised and others infused with the new policy. Capacity building of pre-service staff in Paro and Samtse in the short-term is implied here to follow up on the work completed there just after the Educating for GNH initiative.

Capacity building is an on-going need. It is especially required from when a new policy is introduced until the new policy becomes part of the culture, that is, it is the norm - "the way we do things around here". Specific areas noted by the authors in the Schuelka and Maxwell book were for the Royal University of Bhutan to give greater emphasis to high quality research and capacity building. Firstly, the curriculum at the Faculty of Traditional Medicine requires long-term capacity development if it is to

become a leader in this form of medicine in the region. Secondly, although non-formal education (NFE) in Bhutan has been a success, Lyonpo Thakur S Powdyel believes that more can be done to serve the developing needs of the people. Thirdly, capacity building in early childhood care and development has begun and must continue if quality education and care (rather than child minding) is to be facilitated.

## **Vocational Education**

Dasho Pema Thinley, amongst others, has stated that tertiary vocational education is the weakest link in the Bhutanese education and training system. The need for action would appear to be a short as well as a long-term need. The results of electrical and plumbing practice that you see as you walk around any town in Bhutan are far from ideal models. The Education Blueprint has addressed this issue, so work has begun. An obvious question is: where will the teachers come from? The Educating for GNH initiative points to the dignity of labour and a positive acceptance of doing manual work. Presently the number of students attending vocational education classes is low. The quality of the practical outcomes could be vastly improved. New conceptions of how students learn in the vocational areas in Bhutan appear to be necessary, especially with attention to viable vocational opportunities for females to facilitate their entry to the workplace.

We also know that many young Bhutanese are looking for employment. The teaching and application of *Zorig Chusum* could lead to the valuing not only the 13 traditional Bhutanese arts and crafts but also the honouring of the manual creation of things that have use, including carpentry, plumbing and electrical work. Moreover, if NFE were to also incorporate the learning of English, it might result in an increase in the recruitment, training and retention of motivated young Bhutanese and would then provide an alternative pathway for the many who are looking for employment.

## **Accountability and Autonomy**

It is reasonable for educators at all levels to be accountable for what they say and do. It is also reasonable to call the government to account for societal issues. Such an issue is the consistent concern about attracting teachers to the profession, particularly those with the right qualities. Similarly, there has been a continuous call for attention to be paid to teacher salaries and

working conditions. Although initial efforts were made in the 1990s, it is hard to imagine the right people being attracted to a difficult, but important, profession when the pay and working conditions do not match up to those in other areas. Shifting the focus, does it make sense for the university sector to be expanded when the employment for graduates is more limited than, say, the employment of Bhutanese carpenters, electricians and brick layers? Again, calls for English to be incorporated into the NFE courses would seem more timely now than even 10 years ago. At a different level, a case has been made for a fully independent Bhutan Council for School Examinations and Assessment (BCSEA). The good work of the BCSEA and of its predecessors is quite well known, but more could be done if the BCSEA was independent rather than just autonomous.

Institutions need to be accountable also. We know how important international benefactors have been to Bhutan but that resources is drying up as needs are perceived to be greater elsewhere, notably Sub-Saharan Africa. The reality is that future governments will be providing almost all the resources to the education sector. Builders need to be held accountable for poor quality structures. Toilets need to work. A number of the small schools I have visited had infrastructure that was in a shocking state. Teachers and lecturers need to be in class, as stated in the timetable. Leaders can speak out about issues such as this. Supervisors have a responsibility to call those not doing the right thing to account. Calling people to account is hard to do but it is an essential part of good governance.

Finally, we are all accountable for our own actions. Mindfulness is critical. Reflection on actions is central to the process of being responsible for our actions because it implies that we will learn from that reflection and make changes, thus avoiding the need to be called to account.

## Conclusion

Educating for GNH has the potential to be far-reaching. I argued that teachers already have, in their make up, recognised the power of the hidden curriculum to teach GNH values and principles. Tacit learning of the kind that we all learnt at our mother's knee, and that we all use as parents, is the key process for all teachers to acknowledge and utilise. Formative evaluation is an accompanying process that teachers can use to increase hidden curriculum learning by attention to the words and deeds of the students

and themselves alike. Educators can join parents in partnership in teaching the values and principles of GNH. The policy of Educating for GNH will not be successful unless resources are available for on-going-capacity building at the pre- and in-service levels. The waste of one-shot capacity building has to be acknowledged in favour of continuous development over time. There is much to be done, as well as much to be accounted for.

### **Reference**

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