

Mindfulness in Education: Re-imagining Schools for Gross National Happiness in Practice

Deki Choden and Tim Huang¹

Research consistently shows that mindfulness in education improves not only student wellbeing but also academic outcomes. Many studies have linked regular mindfulness practice to enhanced concentration, improved memory, reduced anxiety and greater emotional regulation.

A comprehensive 2023 review of 424 studies found that when students around the world undergo mindfulness and social-emotional learning programmes at school, they perform better in the classroom, experiencing significantly improved executive function skills, learning attitudes, and academic achievement outcomes (Ciprano et al. 2023).

A 2021 qualitative study involving 367 secondary school students in Trashigang district investigated how mindfulness meditation influenced behaviour and school climate (Dorji et al. 2021). Though it was largely based on subjective reports and lacked detailed quantitative analysis, both teachers and students observed positive effects, such as improved concentration and a calmer mind.

This evidence is now recognised within Bhutan's education system, where wellbeing is increasingly being seen as inseparable from academics, and is also gaining momentum globally. For example, the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) has revised its survey framework and data collection methods, to go beyond measuring literacy, numeracy and science competencies, now incorporating indicators of student wellbeing, engagement, sense of belonging and life satisfaction.

¹ Deki Choden is the founding principal and Tim Huang leads wellbeing programmes at the ELC School, Thimphu.

This reflects a growing consensus that education systems must nurture the whole child through mindfulness and social-emotional learning if students are to flourish in the 21st century.

The first national mandate for mindfulness in education began with the Ministry of Education's Educating for Gross National Happiness (GNH) Initiative. Launched in 2009, the initiative aimed to align Bhutan's schools with the country's holistic development vision, advocating for a "Green School" framework with eight dimensions of "greenery" — natural, social, cultural, intellectual, academic, aesthetic, spiritual and moral.

Case reports show that many schools had adopted "Green School" practices to actualise the eight dimensions through nature clubs, values and life skills education, and contemplative practices. Studies of implementation point to variability, with some schools having embraced most dimensions, but for others only a few (Ministry of Education 2012).

In 2018, the Ministry of Education introduced the Google-developed Search Inside Yourself (SIY) training programme to 125 teacher trainers who were asked to roll it out further to teachers across the country, bringing mindfulness practices to Bhutan from a predominantly Western scientific perspective.

In 2019, the Contentment Foundation began piloting its Four Pillars of Wellbeing programme – with the four pillars of Mindfulness, Community, Self-Curiosity and Contentment & Balance – at the Educating for Lifelong Citizenship (ELC) School in Thimphu. Dr. Dorji Wangchuk and Dr. Karma Phuntsho both played important roles in the cultural contextualisation of the curriculum by integrating Bhutanese values and concepts such as *nyingjé* (compassion) and *chhokshay* (contentment).

At the ELC School for instance, through the Four Pillars in practice, mindfulness has become non-negotiable as a central pillar of the learning experience. Since the school's founding nearly three decades ago, and inspired by Bhutan's Gross National Happiness philosophy, ELC has prioritised daily mindfulness in classrooms for all its students, pre-primary to grade 10.

When a mindfulness gong rings hourly across the school, all students and staff stop whatever they are doing to take a sacred pause, breathing deeply and coming back into the present moment. Educators and students begin every period, class or exam with such a mindful moment. This is all grounded in the belief that when students feel well, they will do well.

An ELC student shares about the mindfulness practice: “It’s about how powerful the mind can be. Whenever I’m in the exams, I just take some deep breaths and it actually really helps me.”

Every week at ELC, well-being sessions rooted in the Four Pillars of Wellbeing bring out the best in students and teachers as good human beings. Through a variety of lessons on topics such as cultivating *gatsbor* (gratitude), identifying emotions using a Wheel of Emotions [*thangka*], and practicing unconditional acceptance of all of life’s experiences, students and teachers learn evidence-based and culturally-contextualised tools to practice mindfulness, become more curious about their inner lives through journaling, share and serve from their hearts with peers to strengthen school community, and welcome all their emotions with self-compassion.

The ELC school blends these sessions on the contemporary science of emotions with ancient Bhutanese spiritual values and traditions, such as through a recent *Choeshed Leyrim* (Spiritual Programme) with Kyabje Kalu Rinpoche on the *Niguma Yoga* practice.

As the pilot and model school for the Four Pillars of Wellbeing, ELC also partners with the Contentment Foundation Bhutan to share its best practices with other schools across the country, to do its small part to help realise the vision of Gross National Happiness in education.

In the last two years, an all-Bhutanese team from the Contentment Foundation worked with Bhutan’s Ministry of Education and Skill Development (MOESD) to hold retreats and training for all of Bhutan’s School Counsellors across 141 schools, in the Four Pillars of Wellbeing, equipping them with self-care tools to prevent burnout, as well as with social-emotional learning tools to support fellow educators and students with resilience skills and reflective self-awareness.

Initial data from this programme has been overwhelmingly positive, with over 90% of trained counsellors finding the programme helpful in addressing educator burnout, and with many specific takeaways around implementing a daily mindfulness practice in their schools to support student wellbeing (Contentment Foundation 2025).

Today, with a variety of different programmes and approaches, from the Green School to Search Inside Yourself to the Four Pillars of Wellbeing, among others, mindfulness practices continue to be implemented and deepened in classrooms nationwide. The practice of short meditations and emotional regulation exercises are now becoming more commonplace in Bhutanese schools.

To inspire further progress, the Royal University of Bhutan hosted a 2024 International Symposium on Re-imagining Education from a GNH Perspective, at the Paro College of Education, to bring together a community of practice of over 200 global education leaders.

The symposium focused on revisiting the GNH paradigm in education, revitalising GNH-based pedagogy, and facilitating the exchange of local and global best practices. Participants, including policymakers, researchers, school principals and teachers, highlighted the symposium as a space of fruitful connection and exchange, where they gained practical tools, innovative ideas, and renewed inspiration to advance mindfulness globally for greater impact in Bhutan and beyond.

This commitment to holistic student development has been further solidified in Bhutan by a recent multi-pronged national School Health and Wellbeing Strategy, led by the MOESD in partnership with the PEMA Secretariat, the government's nodal mental health agency established by Her Majesty The Queen Jetsun Pema Wangchuck.

The strategic framework, mandatory wellbeing programmes, educator professional development, and ongoing national guidance to schools have been developed in close consultation with policymakers, district education officers, school leaders, teachers, counsellors, and other key stakeholders across the education system.

With a vision for safe, healthy and inclusive schools and communities, the national strategy underpins a range of vital school wellbeing programmes that are now being rolled out in every school across Bhutan.

Within the strategy, the Mentor-Mentee Programme pairs teachers with small groups of students to foster responsive adult-child relationships in schools. The Student Resilience Development Programme explicitly teaches mindfulness and emotional regulation using various lessons from the Four Pillars of Wellbeing, Search Inside Yourself and other practices.

Counselling Programmes include school-based counselling services and the Sherig e-Counselling Services which enable students to seek online counselling via Facebook. The Peer Helpers Programme trains select students to help identify peers in need of early intervention by counsellors.

School-Based Parenting Education and Awareness Programme promotes positive parenting practices at home to complement school approaches. The Anti-Bullying Awareness Programmes encourage the implementation of the PEMA Secretariat's *Guidelines for Anti-bullying Mechanisms in Educational Institutions* for safe and healthy school climates. *Choeshed Leyrim* leverages Bhutan's rich *Vajrayana* wisdom tradition by bringing into schools local spiritual leaders to share Buddhist perspectives on wellbeing.

Supported by dedicated School Wellbeing Teams, Health and Wellbeing Focal Teachers, and School Counsellors, these programmes have been designed to ensure that student mental health issues are proactively addressed and that schools, as a whole, can support collective wellbeing over time.

While these initiatives are already promoting greater access to services for impact on student wellbeing, the quality of these programmes continues to be refined through additional school guidance and educator professional development, informed by data and feedback. On the whole, the national School Health and Wellbeing Strategy is a critical start to institutionalising wellbeing in the education system as a core component of every child's schooling experience.

By embedding mindfulness into the heart of education, Bhutan aspires to cultivate a generation not only with the academic skills to succeed in

the workplace but also with emotional intelligence, resilience and ethical grounding - invaluable life skills for navigating the interconnected challenges of the 21st century.

To realise the inspiring vision of the Gelephu Mindfulness City, we believe that a mindful city can and must spring from mindful schools, ensuring future generations are authentically equipped to build and thrive within its enlightened framework.

Whether in rural community schools or urban institutions like ELC, mindfulness in Bhutanese education empowers young citizens to embody the principles of Gross National Happiness, and to carry those values into the governance and development of the nation.

References

- Ministry of Education. (2012). *Green School: A Framework for Educating for Gross National Happiness*. Ministry of Education, Royal Government of Bhutan.
- Contentment Foundation. (2025). *Internal survey data monitoring report on the Four Pillars of Wellbeing school counsellor retreats in Bhutan*. The Contentment Foundation.
- Cipriano, C., Rivers, S. E., & Brackett, M. A. (2023). A meta-analysis of social and emotional learning programmes and academic achievement. *Child Development*, 94(1), 28–49.
- Dorji, S., Wangchuk, T., & Gyeltshen, T. (2021). Effect of mindfulness meditation practices on students' behaviour change in secondary schools in Trashigang District, Bhutan. *Asian Journal of Education and Social Studies*, 21(3), 19–29.