

Educating for Gross National Happiness

by Katherine Riley, writing from Paro, Bhutan

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I'm taking a week long break from living and teaching in a hillside monastery in eastern Bhutan to attend a 4-day teacher training on the other side of the country. Hot showers, soft pillows and a drastic reduction in my consumption of rice are some of the perks for having made the 4-day trip through the winding, bumpy roads of the lateral route. What brings me to Paro is the kick-off to a three-year program entitled "Transformative Education for GNH: A Teacher Action Research Project." It's a joint venture between the Oulun Lyseon Lukio in Finland and Bhutan's own Royal Education Council.

For those of you unfamiliar with the Bhutanese concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH), it's a government policy very much aligned with the ideals of sustainable development. GNH is a concept articulated by the fourth

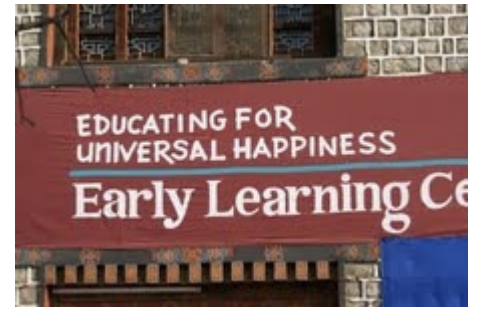


King Jigme Singye Wangchuck in 1972 which seeks to measure the well-being of the country by looking beyond the purely financial. Instead, GNH considers what are termed the four pillars of wellness: environmental conservation, sustainable and equitable socio-economic development, preservation and promotion of culture, and good

governance. While these aren't new concepts, what is different about this small Himalayan country is that these are the ideals that form the basis of government policy. These are the ideals that are in the forefront of discussions about the manner and pace of development. And while there is much debate and discussion about what GNH means and what it looks like within the framework of a rapidly modernizing Bhutan, the simple fact that these sustainability concepts are in the discussion on equal terms with economic considerations offers a hopeful alternative to a solely Gross Domestic Product (GDP) approach to development.

In December of 2009, Bhutan hosted an international educational conference entitled "Educating for Gross National Happiness." According to the Ministry of Education's website, the outcome of that conference was the agreement that Bhutan's educational system "will effectively cultivate GNH principles and values, including 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." To this end, the government is working to develop a country-wide rich and rigorous curriculum founded on GNH principles, making learning more relevant, thoughtful and aligned with sustainable practices.

This week's teacher training is designed "to develop the capacity of teachers to develop and implement actions to promote GNH schools" and to meet the vision of the "Educating



for GNH" project. The educators come from seven GNH Beacon Schools which are working to model GNH values on their school campuses as well as creating curriculum which will embed the lofty values and principles of GNH into the cultural consciousness of their students. In this way, the schools will become the vehicles of social transformation within Bhutanese society. And as the Minister of Education, Lyonpo Thakur S. Powdyel has stated, "the

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teachers hold the key to the success of our mission." And the group here in Paro certainly take this responsibility seriously.

They take to heart the sentiment expressed by the Minister of Education at the opening of the 2009 Educating for GNH conference: "Today we attempt to link the present with the future and the living with the unborn. And the kind of...educational experience...that we provide to our younger generation will determine our success with our national vision. Today we are, in effect, affirming and asserting the claims of a nation's dream on its educational system."

Bhutan faces many challenges in this drive to ensure high student learning and achievement based on Bhutanese values. The education system is fraught with overcrowded classrooms, electricity and water supply issues, a shortage of textbooks and highly trained teachers. Listening to this local group of twenty teachers and administrators, they are concerned about,

among other things, building safety, quality and quantity of resource materials, and preparing their students for the national high stakes testing. In the rural east where I've been teaching, there are additional problems with adequate transportation to and from school and the costs associated with mandatory uniforms, notebooks and pencils.

Not ignoring the serious challenges faced by many Bhutanese schools, the "Transformative Education for GNH"



training asks educators to focus on those areas in which they can directly affect change. They will leave this training ready to implement their action plans in their schools. And they'll have ongoing support and direction from the Royal Education Council and their Finnish partners. Ultimately, the goal is for these trainings to take place in each of Bhutan's twenty dzongkhags (administrative districts). And in this way, real nationwide educational transformation will take place.

"Transformative Education for GNH" is still a relatively new project. In Paro this week the impact of the project is very tangible. While I'm no expert on the success and challenges of the project, I have had the opportunity to observe other examples of "educating for GNH" since arriving in Bhutan in January. Many schools have incorporated meditation or mindfulness practices into the school day. I was particularly impressed by a group of pre-primary to

3rd graders standing silently in rows for sixty seconds on their first day of class in Thimphu. A number of elementary schools in the capital, led by the Early Learning Center, have joined the international "Design for Change" competition and have brought plastic free and/or no trash policies to their schools. There are student-led clean drinking water campaigns and movements to stop doma spitting at holy sites and around school campuses. Paro's own Khangkhu Middle Secondary School has implemented a GNH seventh period

during which students take part in activities aligned with the goal of increasing awareness and understanding of the national policy. The Druk School has quarterly reports assessing GNH Social Traits such as

whether a student is "responsible, humorous, compassionate, confident." These are filled out not only by teachers, but by parents and students as well. Such reports certainly create the potential for rich and meaningful conversations and deeper understandings of GNH.

Yesterday I had dinner with Sonam Wangdu, a nineteen year veteran teacher. She's a busy wife and mother of three teenagers, teaching full time and working on a two year Master Teacher program. I asked her why she was interested in the GNH curriculum project on top of this other time consuming teacher training. She said that all of the work towards becoming a better teacher is aligned with GNH. She



wants her students to hold onto the deeply held values that have served this unique, Buddhist kingdom so well. And she wants to help prepare them to confidently and thoughtfully participate as active players in the twenty-first century. As citizens of Bhutan and as citizens of the world.

The Royal Education Council, in collaboration with teachers and administrators, has compiled a long list of "Qualities of a GNH Graduate." Sonam's vision seems very much aligned with the quality that caught my attention. A GNH graduate will be "conscious about our nature of interdependence and impermanence." As Bhutan works toward developing

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schools and national curriculum to meet such goals, I am hopeful that they are embarking on a course that will lead to the creation of a generation of even more mindful, far-sighted and compassionate citizens.

