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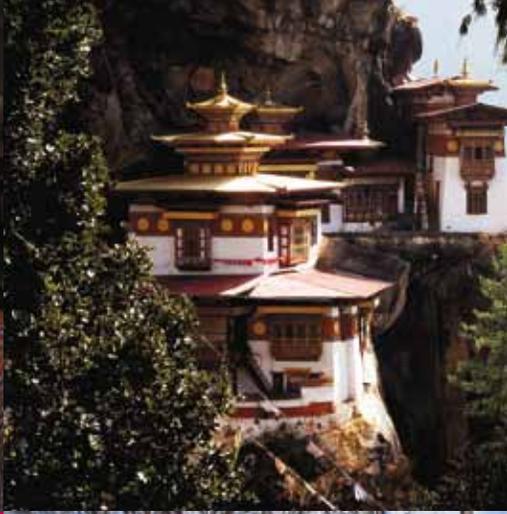
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The Global Schoolhouse

SCHOOLING FOR HAPPINESS

Bhutan's Big Dream BY KENT BICKNELL





“If a country has a big dream, the education system of that country must support and advance that dream.”

— Thakur S. Powdyel, Bhutan’s Minister of Education

In December 2009, I traveled to the Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan for a weeklong workshop, “Educating for Gross National Happiness.” At the invitation of the royal government, international participants joined with local teachers, principals, and students to discover ways that Bhutanese schools could better support the country’s commitment to Gross National Happiness (GNH). Since the 1970s, Bhutan has sought to measure its growth through standards based on GNH rather than the Gross National Product index that most other countries rely on. Our task was to find ways in which the educational system could enhance the material and spiritual health of current and future generations — and I was honored to represent U.S. independent schools in this undertaking.¹



In the last leg of my journey, I left the haze of New Delhi, flew past Mount Everest, and swooped down into the Paro Valley of Bhutan, landing at what has to be one of the most beautiful and tranquil airports in the world, and the only one in the country. Through my familiarity with India, I expected I would “know” Bhutan (the square mile equivalent of New Hampshire and Vermont combined, with a population of 700,000), but I did not. The city of Paro seemed to have hardly any people; the air was sparkling; there was little traffic; nobody was rushing to and fro; and at night the sky was filled with stars. I had arrived in a land, I would learn, where time cycles through the seasons — 80 percent of the country still farms — and where a Buddhist perspective prevails, from the architecture of the airport to the *Dzongs* (fortress monasteries) that double as seats of government. In Bhutan, smoking is prohibited — everywhere! When His Majesty the 4th Dragon King, Jigme Singye Wangchuck, informed his subjects in 1999 that television and the



Roy, and Zenobia Barlow and to work side-by-side with Bhutanese counterparts, including Prime Minister Jigmi Y. Thinley, and the Bhutan Minister (Lyonpo) of Education Thakur S. Podyel. The enthusiasm generated was such that, before we all dispersed, the ministry of education announced plans

thing good, wholesome, positive, and healthy.” He continued, “At the end of the day, these different dimensions of greenery are the elements of a life: natural or environmental greenery, intellectual greenery, academic greenery, social, cultural, spiritual, aesthetic, and moral greenery — all these together make us who we are. If we are able to address these in the school system, it will be a more satisfying combination of experiences for children so they may be more integrated as human beings. They may be much happier and more reflective, and so be more sensitive. Today the world lacks sensitivity — towards each other, towards the environment, towards Mother Nature, towards all the elements that sustain our life.”

Always keep clean and green. Smile and let smile. Strive for excellence. Take pride in being Bhutanese. Act with humility.

Internet would be allowed in Bhutan, he also outlawed the use of plastic bags because they are nonsustainable.

Bhutan’s commitment to the well-being of its people is built on four pillars: (1) economic development, sustainable over generations; (2) conservation of the environment; (3) good governance that is transparent (the Fourth King introduced democracy and Bhutanese now vote for a parliament); and (4) preservation of cultural values.² We focused on these during the “Educating for GNH” workshop, and by the end of the week we had mapped out a number of ways to fold GNH principles into a K–12 curriculum (see sidebar on page 59). It was exciting to be surrounded by environmental and educational luminaries like Vandana Shiva, Mark Mancall, Satish Kumar, David Orr, Bunker

to host GNH workshops for all school principals in the country.

I returned to Sant Bani School (New Hampshire), where I have been head of school since 1973, but stayed in close contact with the minister of education, Lyonpo Thakur. He informed me that the follow-up sessions with Bhutan’s principals were quite successful. They offered the principals a welcome time to reflect and trade stories about what was (and was not) working. After sharing their own best practices and hearing the ideas generated in the December workshop, the principals pledged to create “Green Schools for Green Bhutan,” a promise subsequently adopted by all 20 districts of the country.

As Lyonpo Thakur explained to me, to be green encompasses “every-

Happiness in Action

Curious to see how the ideas in the workshops were manifesting, I returned to Bhutan in March 2011 as a guest of the Ministry of Education. Lyonpo Thakur had graciously paved the way for me to visit a number of schools in the capital city, Thimphu (population just shy of 100,000). When I landed in Paro, Madame Phuntsho Lham, a ministry official, worked closely with me to coordinate all aspects of my visit. She had arranged a brief meeting with the minister late that first afternoon, as he had to travel outside the city for the next five days.

EDUCATING FOR GROSS NATIONAL HAPPINESS

“Educating for GNH” recognizes that:

- *Collaboration amongst diverse groups is critical for building a sustainable future.*
- *Students should be key players in these groups.*
- *Transparency in governance begins with the active involvement of students and families in the organization of the school.*
- *Sustainability needs to radiate out from the campus to the community at large to ensure broad ecoliteracy.*
- *A healthy community-service program strengthens all.*
- *Elders and indigenous peoples are storehouses of a wisdom that must be preserved.*
- *Education is about the heart and spirit, as well as the mind and body.*
- *Practices that teach us to pause and reflect are a critical component of education, and these come in a variety of forms, including the arts, contemplation, journaling, and critical thinking.*

The minister, noting that our time was too short, kindly invited me to come for dinner that evening. I was thrilled to visit his home in the ministers’ enclave, and to dine with the minister, his wife, and my guide and friend, Madame Karma Wangmo. Over tea, we had a lengthy discussion about education, particularly around infusing GNH principles into schools. Lyonpo Thakur explained, “If a country has a big dream, the education system of that country must support and advance that dream. And it is important for nations to have big dreams. Just as we as individuals must have dreams, so also nations and societies must have their dreams.” He noted

that His Majesty the 4th King, Jigme Singye Wangchuck, had the vision for Bhutan. It is not enough simply to live day-to-day, earning our daily bread. There is more to life, more to societies, more to nations than simply surviving as an economic animal. “At present,” Lyonpo Thakur added, “we have people who demand more; we have made people much more degree- and diploma-conscious, but less character-conscious, less morality-conscious, less sensitive. And it is this kind of insensitivity that brings no respect for the environment, no respect for each other, no respect for the earth, no respect for and appreciation of the good things of life.... We hope that educating for GNH will address the varied dimensions of our life.”

That evening I returned to my cozy room in the Wangchuk Hotel in downtown Thimphu, eager to visit the first school on my list.

Zilukha Lower Secondary School (Pre-K–8) is terraced into a steep hill on the outskirts of Thimphu. The week before my visit, a fire had burned the fields around the school, stopping just shy of the buildings. The blackened earth did nothing to darken the enthusiasm of opening days (the academic year in Bhutan begins in late February). I observed democracy in action as the 850 students eagerly used official government voting machines to elect the coming year’s “team captains,” responsible for organizing much of the social and co-curricular life of the school. While several hundred students sat in the courtyard waiting to vote, an array of teachers, alumni, and students (including a third grader with the voice of an angel) entertained the group with songs and stories. Principal Madame Tshewang Peldon invited me to address the students, which I did briefly.³ As we toured the terraced campus, Madame Tshewang was happy to point out that a facilities upgrade had begun. At present, some of the lower grades have close to 60 students per class, although below fourth grade there are two teachers per group. For fourth grade and above, there is only one teacher per group,

even if the class has more than 40 students.

Back in Madame Tshewang’s office, I noticed Zilukha’s mission, vision, and core beliefs posted on the wall. I asked her if each school developed its own, and she assured me they did. Zilukha’s core beliefs are: *Always keep clean and green. Smile and let smile. Strive for excellence. Take pride in being Bhutanese. Act with humility.*

Next stop was one of the elite high schools in the country, Yangchenphug Higher Secondary School (YHSS). Over tea, Principal Madame Pema Wangdi and her administrative staff presented a snapshot of YHSS, followed by a tour. Given the exuberant sense of the joy of learning combined with seriousness of purpose, I felt at home in this large government school (more than 1,000 students). I saw labs, classrooms, the lovely library at the heart of the school, a large auditorium, and, on the top floor of the main building, a Buddhist temple with a resident *Rinpoche* (revered monk). Rohit Adhikari, a recent graduate of YHSS who had participated in the 2009 workshop, joined me on the tour so I could have an insider’s view. He informed me that the beloved *Rinpoche* had been in residence since the school’s founding in 1965 — and all were sad that he was retiring at the end of the year.

On March 8, I visited Lungtenzampa Middle Secondary School. Principal Madame Kinley Pem and I conversed at length while we toured the campus. At one point, she left me alone with a 10th grade class, and we covered a variety of topics. The students were open and engaging, and clearly had embraced a number of GNH values, from “green schools for a green Bhutan,” to pride in their campus and program, to the value of walking to school, to the power of saying “no” to any kind of bullying, teasing, or name-calling. My dialogue with this class suggested a culture that nurtures students while encouraging them to find their own voices. Individual class vegetable and flower gardens were just that: individually designed and maintained by each class. Toward the end of

my visit, Madame Kinley invited me to partake of a delicious vegetarian lunch in her home, perched on a hill just above the main buildings. As I walked through her gardens amid a bevy of welcoming dogs, I sensed the trappings of a traditional New England boarding school. However, on the verandah I turned and saw, high on a hill, the huge

“The world is moved along, not only by the mighty shoves of its heroes, but also by the aggregate of tiny pushes of each honest worker.”

statue of the Buddha that overlooks the sprawling city.⁴

As I navigated through the recess traffic patterns of the lively students at Jigme Losel Primary School, I paused before a wooden sign planted in one of the gardens. It contained a quote by Helen Keller that gave new light to what I was witnessing: “I long to accomplish great and noble tasks, but it is my chief duty to accomplish humble tasks as though they were great and noble. The world is moved along, not only by the mighty shoves of its heroes, but also by the aggregate of tiny pushes of each honest worker.”

Here, in the midst of a government school serving 857 students in a non-affluent part of the Dragon Kingdom’s major city, Thimphu, I saw many opportunities for “tiny pushes.” Here was a green school in action. Students used recycled plastic jugs for hand washing (“tippy-taps”), and dustpans made from used containers. Compact class gardens, recently planted with flowers and vegetables,

dotted the schoolyard, all nourished by compost generated at Jigme Losel. Student-made posters encouraging the value of recycling, healthy habits, the kind treatment of others, and celebrating International Women’s Day were omnipresent, as were individual reflections on topics such as “Why I come to school” and “Reading is a basic tool

Sant Bani School. At the ELC, learning is an adventure in which students and teachers journey together. Class size is small (20 or less), and the evidence of collaboration is present in every nook of the student-art-covered walls. ELC is involved in the worldwide Design for Change movement⁵ that encourages children to tackle and



in the living of a good life.” The school prides itself on its Five R approach to waste management: Reduce, Replace, Refuse (take less), Recycle, Reuse. As the hour for lunch approached, a number of parent volunteers helped arrange tables of colorful woven baskets, each containing healthy lunches wrapped in eco-friendly material.

The principal, Madame Choki Dukpa, was thrilled to share these facets of the vibrant life of Jigme Losel with me.

Shortly after I arrived in Thimphu, I attended an education *zomdue* (informal gathering), where a diverse group of teachers, monks, officials, principals, students, and an author engaged in an animated conversation about various topics across the educational spectrum. There I met Madame Deki Choden, Barnard College graduate and founder of the Early Learning Center (ELC), who encouraged me to add her school to my itinerary. I am happy I did, as her approach is so in synch with that of

solve real-world issues. The approach is based on four steps in which the students are asked to *feel, imagine, do, and share*. ELC is a greenhouse for student-led projects that have reached far beyond their campus, including the student-designed plan to generate zero waste through substituting indigenous treats for the prevailing packaged snacks in plastic wrappers. Students first cleaned up their own campus, and then spread the word through appearances on national TV and presentations that have reached more than 80 other schools.⁶ As head of an independent school, a rarity in Bhutan, Madame Deki was excited to attend all of the GNH-in-education workshops and feels much support from the ministry of education.

Two days before departing, I visited Motithang Higher Secondary School, one of the top high schools in the country in terms of scores on the national exams. There is no doubt that the soft-spoken principal, Madame Karma Zangmo, is a dynamic leader whom

any school would be thrilled to have. Rather than a whirlwind tour of the campus, she arranged for me to meet with a handful of students and faculty. The conversation was lively, as the students and I bounced from topic to topic. They eagerly shared differences in the school since it began to focus on GNH principles in the classroom. Through the student council and other vehicles they brought new ideas to faculty, a

path never imagined in the educational paradigm of Bhutan a decade ago. As they began to find the power of the collective voice, their ideas were heard, and MHSS subsequently made alterations in the schedule to allow for more flexible programming. With pride the students gave me a copy of the new Motithang HSS magazine by and for students, *Teen Generation 2010*, filled with their own writing. Topics included how to be

green at home, the dangers of excess dieting, reviews of Bhutanese bands, and a self-administered “stress test.” At the end of our discussion, they said that what we had shared was of such value I should come back and address the entire student body — all 1,255 of them.

On my last full day in Bhutan, I did just that. I stood before the assembled students and faculty, and spoke of how much we have in common; that education is a question of heart connecting to heart as much as minds being opened. I shared my long-time connection with the spiritual teachings of Asia, and mentioned that a famous American from the 1850s, Henry David Thoreau, was passionate about the wisdom to be found in texts like *The Bhagavad Gita* and the words of the Buddha, and that Mahatma Gandhi was then inspired by Thoreau. The students, each in uniform and sitting cross-legged on the ground, listened intently for half an hour. It was most rewarding to watch ripples of laughter flow through the crowd as I shared humorous stories.⁷

Humanizing Our Educational System

As my second visit to Bhutan drew to a close, I savored Lyonpo Thakur’s invitation to come back and spend six months in schools all over the country. GNH has skeptics in Bhutan, particularly when it moves beyond broad concepts to address systemic issues. Were the schools I visited a fair sampling from which to draw general conclusions about the state of education in Bhutan? Probably not; but they bear witness to a strong effort to humanize a traditional education system. The dream is there, and the rest of the world ought to take note of these noble aspirations.

Robert Kennedy shared a similar dream with us when he delivered his first major presidential campaign speech in March 1968:

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pollution and cigarette advertising, and the destruction of the redwood and the loss of our natural wonder in chaotic sprawl. It counts napalm and nuclear warheads... and the television programs which glorify violence in order to sell toys to our children. It does not allow for the health of our children, the quality of their education or the joy of their play. It does not include the beauty of our poetry or the strength of our marriages, the intelligence of our public debate or the integrity of our public officials. It measures neither our wit nor our courage, neither our wisdom nor our learning, neither our compassion nor our devotion to our country. It measures everything, in short, except that which makes life worthwhile. And it can tell us everything about America except why we are proud that we are Americans.

It is not clear to me whether we have had a "big dream" since President Kennedy challenged us to land on the moon. If America were to be guided by RFK's vision, how might our education system "promote and advance that dream?" Perhaps some answers lie in the large heart and mindful approach of the Dragon Kingdom of Bhutan.

Kent Bicknell is the head of Sant Bani School (New Hampshire).

Notes

1. A primary organizer of the conference was Dr. Ron Colman of Nova Scotia's Genuine Progress Index (GPI). For more information, see www.gnhc.gov.bt and www.sji.bt.
2. Bhutan's efforts to "preserve the culture" resulted in a number of challenges to its efforts to achieve GNH. As many have noted, acts intended to include people of Bhutanese origin led to the exclusion of many who had lived in the country for years (in some cases, generations). This two-decade-long problem is still in a state of flux, and is an enormously important topic beyond the scope of this article.
3. All of the government schools are English medium, so I had no problem communicating with anyone in the country.
4. This enormous statue of the Buddha is still under construction. It is new since 2009, and it can be seen from almost all parts of the city.
5. Created by artist/designer Kiran Bir Sethi at the Riverside School in Ahmedabad, India, founded in 2001. See www.schoolriverside.com.
6. See www.youtube.com/watch?v=X4TDKYRaFOI.
7. The full text of my address at Motithang HSS is available at www.santbanischool.org.

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