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Gross National Happiness: *Ideology versus practices in Bhutanese Secondary Schools?*

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Abstract

This paper investigates practices related to the ideology of infusing Gross National Happiness (GNH) into school curriculum, the effectiveness of the meditation and mind training and the implication of GNH for school environment. It also explores how GNH ambience has been managed and practiced by teachers in higher secondary schools in Bhutan. The investigation aim at answering questions related to how it is possible to inculcate values in the students, infusion of the GNH values in subjects of specialisation, the understandings of the ideas of GNH being applied in the school environment, the influence of the concept of GNH in school life generally and specifically and the effects on teachers and students of mindful training in the class, how does it work?

The investigation is based on empirical data from eight selected secondary schools spread all over Bhutan. Principals, teachers, students and parents were interviewed in 2012/2013 individually and in groups. Further more classroom observations took place. Finally the investigation is based on literature review and readings of documents, which describe and analyse policies, principles, strategies and philosophies related to the implementation of Gross National Happiness and Educating for Gross National happiness.

Keywords: Ideology, Curriculum, Mediation and mindfulness and GNH ambience

Introduction

Bhutan, located in South Asia shares its border with two giant nations, China and India. A small land locked country with an area of 38,394 sq. kms (Bhutan at a glance, NSB) and a population of 745,153, (Population Projections of Bhutan 2005-2030, NSB) is guided by the development philosophy of Gross National Happiness (Thinley 2007).

In 2009 a big benchmark for the concept of ‘Gross National Happiness’ in Bhutan was set up. Though, the ideology had already been introduced in Bhutan by the fourth King Jigme Singye Wangchuk in 1970’s, its practical aspect still remained unresearched. The former Prime Minister of Bhutan Jigme Y. Thinley states, “*We spent some years shying away from the responsibility of presenting GNH in acceptable terms and translating it amply into practical action by simply taking refuge in the vision, concept, and the term itself.*” (Hayward & Colman 2010, p. 13). The government initiated to launch the GNH ideology into practices by gluing it with Ministry of Education. The theme “Educating for Gross National

Happiness” began to spread across the schools in the country from 2010 academic sessions onwards.

The “Educating for Gross National Happiness” was among other things intended to induce changes in age-old customs of teaching and learning processes. The motive was to internalize the values and customs in every step of teaching and learning. As Thinley(2010) puts it in his opening speech of the workshop for “Educating for Gross National Happiness”, *A genuinely GNH-inspired educational system aim at ensuring that values related to GNH will be so deeply felt and internalized that they will manifest simply and naturally in all situations—in and out of school* (Delegates Booklet – GNH workshop 19th January – 12th February 2010, p. 25). Thus, 2010 initiation of the programme “Educating for GNH” in all schools to infuse GNH values and principles aims to develop responsible, thoughtful citizens with the right values, skills and knowledge.

The other vision statements of ‘Educating for GNH’ was, that Bhutan's school system will have GNH-minded teachers and GNH-infused learning environments, and access to these for all Bhutanese children and youth. Within one year, all Bhutan’s school principals were expected to having received GNH-inspired education, and within a period of three years, all of Bhutan's teachers were expected to having received effective education within their teaching areas, related to the values of GNH. (Educating for GNH 2009)

Educating for GNH is being implemented through five pathways:

- ✓ Infusing GNH into school curriculum across all the subjects
- ✓ Broader learning environment-meditation and mind training and creating GNH ambience and atmosphere.
- ✓ Nonformal and informal education
- ✓ Holistic assessment
- ✓ Critical and creative thinking .(Educating for GNH 2009)

This paper examines TWO out of the five GNH ideology pathways; 1) *Infusing GNH into school curriculum* and *Broader learning environment-meditation and mind training and 2) creating GNH ambience and atmosphere*. These two aspects of GNH ideology will be viewed from its practical application perspective in some selected Bhutanese higher Secondary

Schools. A series of interviews have been decoded and analysed to verify how the ideologies can be seen put into practice.

GNH: Historical Background Condition

Kesebir & Diener (2008, p. 69) have cited Aristoteles' view on happiness, which states that "*Happiness is the meaning and purpose of life, the whole aim and end of human existence.*" Aristoteles relates happiness to 'the good'. The pursuit of happiness is thus equal to the pursuit of the good. For Aristoteles the good is the same as to realize ethical virtues such as courage, justice, prudence, temperance, generosity, magnanimity, gentleness, modesty, indignation and friendship (Aristoteles (1894) 2004).

However, the GNH philosophy is based on Buddhist philosophy and Buddhist understandings of happiness, where happiness is understood as a quality of the mind that arises from positive 'mental attitudes'. These attitudes include for instance the intention never to harm others, the desire to provide support to people around us, and to remain contented with one's life (Tashi 2004:483). In this understanding happiness is a state of mind that does not depend on external stimuli (for instance money and other material things).

You can say that the ultimate aim for everyone is to live a happy life. Ura/Galey & Ruut (2004) define *happiness* as the degree to which a person enjoys life as a whole. They further state that 'Gross National Happiness' defines the degree to which citizen in a country enjoy the life they live. The statement "*Gross National Happiness is more important than Gross National Product*" received much attention from outside Bhutan and call for implementation was urgent. The centre of Bhutan Studies developed and set up GNH pillars, domains and indicators in order to be able to track the progress of the development goals of the Nation.

The four pillars of Gross national happiness are, 1) Sustainable and equitable socio-economic development, 2) Preservation and promotion of culture, 3) Conservation of the environment and 4) Good governance.

These four pillars have been further classified into nine domains in order to create widespread understanding of GNH and to reflect the holistic range of GNH values. The nine domains are: 1) Psychological wellbeing, 2) Health, 3) Education, 4) Time use, 5) Cultural diversity and resilience, 6) Good governance, 7) Community vitality, 8) Ecological diversity and resilience, and 9) Living standards. The domains represents each of the components of wellbeing of the Bhutanese people, and the term 'wellbeing' here refers to fulfilling

conditions of a 'good life' as per the values and principles were laid down by the concept of Gross National Happiness.¹ The Ministry of Education initiated the new paradigm shift in 2009 for education in Bhutan, 'Educating for Gross National Happiness'. Infusion of GNH through school settings and curriculums were found to be the most appropriate way of promoting the development of the philosophy of Gross National Happiness in the country. It was very clear from the statement, made by the former Prime Minister, "*We have identified education as the glue that holds the whole enterprise together*" (Hayward & Colman 2010, p.14). As result, all schools initiated the infusion of GNH values and principles in their curriculum.

Research methodology

In order to find answers on and to explore on how practices related to the ideology of infusing GNH into school curriculum, the effectiveness of the meditation and mind training and its implication for school environment have taken place so far, and how GNH ambience has been managed and practiced by teachers in the secondary schools and their roles in community, a study was done in collaboration with Danish researchers². The study is based on eight case studies done in selected Higher Secondary Schools in Bhutan. The qualitative approach of the study is focused on investigating Principals', Teachers', Students' and Parents' views and experiences with the use of GNH philosophy in classrooms. Semi-structured interviews with these four groups were carried out both individually and in groups. The researchers also observed the classroom experiences of integrating GNH concepts in the teachers' lessons. Detailed notes on physical ambiances of the school atmospheres were made.

In this article only data material from class room observations, and interviews with teachers, principals and some students are included. Here we attempted to examine the following research themes:

1. Inculcation of values in the students, ensuring that values are learned, ? How to find out/or know that the GNH values are learnt by the students? How to measure it? Which is there mechanism that can be followed?

¹ (<http://www.grossnationalhappiness.com/articles/>, downloaded 27th March 2014)

² The research is going on a a collaboration between four reserachers from Samtse teacher college, Bhutan and four reserachers from Aalborg University, Denmark.

2. Managing the diversity of students in the classrooms.
3. Infusion of the GNH values in subjects of specialisation.
4. Understanding of the ideas of GNH being applied in the school environment.
5. The influence of the concept of GNH in school life.
6. The effects on teachers and students of mindful training in the classes.

Research tools

Totally the empirical data material, collected in our studies encompasses:

A description of the school setting

Document analyses

Observations

Semi-structured interviews and

Action research

Data Analysis

The themes that emerged from the interviews and observations were identified and analysed thematically by use of the abduction approach, whereby it was possible for us to discover a coherence that united the general and the specific. As an analytical result, the coherence asserts a conceptual characteristic through the empirically observable. The study attempts to compare the ideology of GNH and its practical implementation in the classroom and school settings. The following guidelines were used for analyzing the empirical data:

- ✓ Five to ten one-line statements each pointing out an interesting topic were made, i.e., a research sub-product that may arise curiosity among people with knowledge of and a dedication towards the development of the Bhutan school system.
- ✓ Each statement was followed by a 5-line explication of the statement's research-related interest value, e.g. how does it challenge current beliefs; or in which ways did it run counter to our expectations; or what makes it noteworthy, or even theoretically significant in the general context of educational research or Bhutan-related research .

- ✓ Each 5-line explication was then again followed by a text that may sustain the *reliability/transparency* of the analysis, explaining how the statement was related to, and drew confirmation from the data material.

Some findings

In the following we present some of the findings from the studies on the selected secondary schools. – The findings are put into the context of *Educating for GNH* and the *green school policy*.

Infusing GNH into school curriculum

Initially, all the school principals and some teachers across the country have been familiarized with the concept of GNH and *Educating for GNH* through participating in workshops and other initiatives. From the empirical data we experienced that the programme followed a series of cascading workshops for the schools teachers, done by principals and other stakeholders at their respective schools. One of the major goals of this programme was the infusion of GNH in the school curriculum across all the levels. The Proceeding of *Education for Gross National Happiness (2009)* quotes, ‘*Bhutan’s entire educational system will effectively cultivate GNH principles and values, 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.*’ (Hayward & Colman, p.67).

As a result of the launch of *Educating for GNH*, school programs and improvement plans, including goals, expectations, and practices, seem now to have been infused by GNH principles and values. Every teacher and student ought to be aware of the GNH concept and philosophy; however the infusion of GNH into the different subjects and topics still seem to be a big challenge for many teachers in the schools.

A teacher said, “*I think it will take time for us to see the changes, because it will be difficult to see the effect overnight. Also our children may not be aware of these kinds of values in the beginning. Even we, teachers who has not been much through with GNH concept, we also face lot of differences in trying to inculcate such values in the children.*” (404:155)

Many of the practices in schools include the remodelling of daily lesson plans with GNH values and principles. Creating awareness of happiness values by writing quotes and anecdotes on the walls of classroom and in schools surroundings is one strategy. One of the biggest challenges many teachers seem to face is to implement the GNH values through lessons. Some teachers tell us that all the pillars and domains within the concept of GNH are very difficult to apply in the classroom and in some of the lessons:

“When I am teaching addition and multiplication, if the students could take care of negative and positive sign and multiply correctly, I feel some sort of GNH values infusion is there. We do not identify the pillars there. It is very difficult but somehow or other with different activities in schools, we are infusing GNH in teaching and learning processes.” (106-95)

“I must accept that it also depends upon their subjects. As teachers teaching maths and science it is hard to include GNH in their subjects. But it depends on their subjects. Since I am a history teacher I can include very well by teaching in a way GNH is also understood by the students.” (306-144)

Concerning the issues of the subjects we see from the data material that it seems to be easier to infuse GNH values and attitudes within subjects like for instance languages, economics and some sciences. On the other hand teachers find it difficult to infuse GNH in for instance mathematics – as mentioned in one of the quotations above.

Some teachers obviously also find, that the values have already been practised in every concept they teach, but to convey those values to the children seems to be a challenge for many of them. In schools some techniques that are applied by the teachers to teach GNH values comprise group work whereby they believe that values like integrity, honesty and team work can be achieved. A teacher for instance said, that GNH values are not taught separately but merged with the lesson,

“The concept of GNH is not discussed separately but merged with the specific content taught during the lesson. Like when we were discussing on the topic” electricity” we also discuss about the ways to conserve electricity.” (204-32)

However, among our interviewed teachers there are still some, who have reservations concerning the introduction of *Educating for GNH* and feel that infusion of GNH in schools system have been introduced without having an in depth study and thorough analysis prior to its implementation.

“It is easy for our education system to have infused or trying to infuse GNH into our syllabus, something like that. They should have done in-depth study, take some time, whatever people get idea from outside, they want to implement right away, not realising the situation of our country, our society is still reserved, conserved kind of people, our society cannot accept the ways of the other people, before we try to infuse whatever system we borrow, let us try to infuse slowly. Over the time, it will naturally get accepted in the society as well.”(404-185)

The effectiveness of the meditation and mind training in the classroom

One of the most prominent and at the same time most easily implemented practices which is linked with the philosophy of *Educating for Gross National Happiness* is the adoption of “Mindful training”, which later teachers started calling “silent sitting”.

A teacher points out that the silent sitting is neither a meditation nor religious, on the other hand it is meant to empty the unwanted thinking present in one’s mind so as to accommodate knowledge, which teachers imparts in that lesson later. Our observations from the empirical study show that teachers typically begin the teaching in classes with meditation.

However, our data material shows that not all teacher and students take silent sitting seriously from some students’ and teachers’ view.

“...only some teacher takes it seriously!”(507-150)

“...we are supposed to do meditation in the class. But honestly saying that practice has become something like a routine, quite mechanical. Like you go to the class and say OK meditation and begin by closing the eyes. I don’t know how far the meditation is taking place”.(112-106)

Yet, some students also describes meditation as having a very positive influence on abilities on concentration and on learning.

“For me when I do meditation, I used to do it seriously and in class I can concentrate more in studies while teachers are teaching.” (207-100)

Creating GNH ambience and atmosphere

The other major initiatives that have been promoted in the schools by the principals and the teachers were the creation of awareness of keeping schools and environments clean. These initiatives have been followed up on a collectively made pledge “*Green schools for Green*

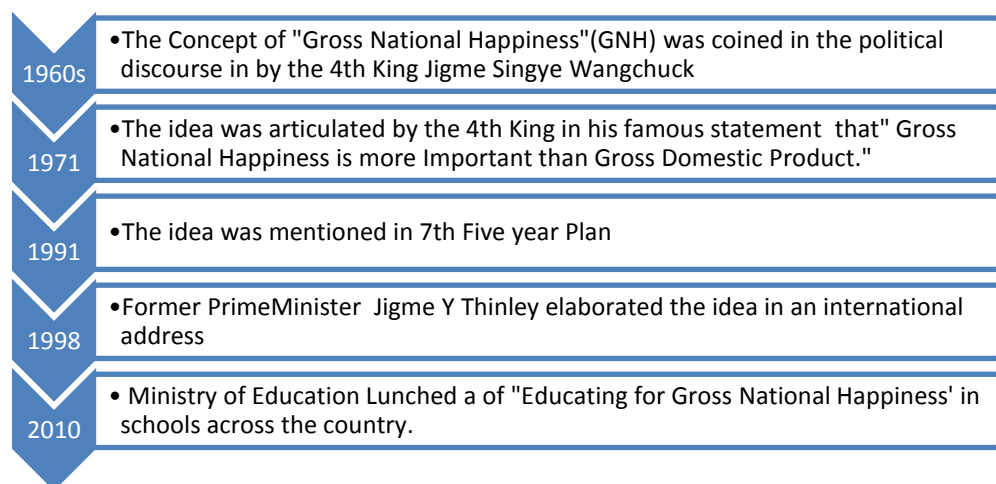
Bhutan” by the school Principals³. It also promotes the active involvement of parents and community and help them to nurture brighter youth of tomorrow. The Government and education leaders have the visions, that Bhutan’s school system has GNH-minded teachers and GNH-infused learning environment, and access to these by all the Bhutanese children and youth. (Hayward & Colman, p.69).

There are many initiatives trying to infuse GNH values through for instance morning speeches, co-curricular activities and cultural events and proper waste management. Many initiatives too have been organised to promote “*Green School*” by the schools across the country. As a teacher said,

“ we have green school for green Bhutan....I don’t think it was a burden, it has been going, only thing is that it has not been pointed out, in fact the schools were already doing and has been doing it”(609).

Students are not allowed to bring with them the junk food and they have to avoid the use of plastic materials. Among students GNH groups have been established, - they name it WMVG (Waste Management Volunteer Group).

Educating for GNH is often regarded as a top-down approach



Source: Ura,Galay & RUUT(2004)

³ Refer to *An extract from Hon'ble Sherig Lyonpo Thakur S Powdyel's key note address during the 14th Annual Education Conference, December.27-29, 2010, Phuentsholing HSS, Chukha, Bhutan.* retrived from <http://www.education.gov.bt/documents/10156/62778/A+Guide+to+School+Management-Contents?version=1.0> dated 20th Feb. 2014

From some of the data material it seems obvious that some principals and some teachers regard the GNH strategy very much as a process coming from top and emerging through Government to schools and to leaders and further on to teachers. Finally from teachers to students, without any of them really feel that they have been involved in decision making processes. Therefore it may be a challenge to implement GNH in schools, as some of the staff strongly feels it as a top – down approach.

“I have to be frank, ...it is not from bottom to top but it is from top to bottom. In a way some time as an administrator it is difficult to incorporate it (GNH) into the system.....Maybe it is the noble vision of his majesty our king but in practically I must accept that it is very difficult to inculcate whatever expectations of our noble vision”.” 306-32

On the contrary, one of the principals actually expresses that he does not find it difficult to infuse GNH into the staff. The big challenge for this principal obviously is to have it infused into the students. In relation to the staff, the principal aims at acting as a role model by practising and showing how you may infuse GNH. And he expects, that the teachers act in the same way together with the students.

However, many among the staff obviously feel confused with the GNH ideology being introduced in the schools and they do not feel themselves being enough educated for practising it. And as GNH just recently has been introduced in the schools (2010), some of them find that it is too early to comment on it.

The kind of confusion about practising GNH is expressed as,

....”we are trying our best, but sometime we are confused also.....If we are sure about GNH we all have it in our mind but when it comes to practice this is difficult...” 502-127

Challenges in transforming GNH into Practice

Lack of common understanding on GNH concepts among the implementers.

One of the most important challenges seen from the empirical data is, that most of the teachers have, is the infusion of GNH concept into their subjects. Generally teachers seem to possess quite a lot of knowledge about the GNH ideology. However, many of them seem to have some difficulties in implementing the ideology into practice, especially in relation to their teaching subjects. Teachers may argue, that GNH values and principles were there from

time immemorial and not a new concept. But from our classroom observations we experienced, that same age old classroom scenario seems very often to prevail.

Conclusion

The launching of ‘*Educating for Gross National Happiness*’ definitely seem to be a noble initiative taken by the Ministry of Education and seen to be very important for continuously developing the educational system in Bhutan; but it also seem to be important at a global level as it arrises some very important questions – what are we educating for - and how do we do it? Right now it is in the process of implementation. Many schools have metamorphosed it in its physical settings, and many GNH quotations and value laden messages surround the school environment. From our studies we see that the pledge for green schools seem to have brought many improvements in the areas like cleanliness, waste management and organic farming. Teacher-students relations seem to have been improved in the process of achieving the wellbeing indicators in most of the classes, we observed. The community involvements also seem to have increased by many folds. However, some teachers expressed reservation towards the mindfulness and mediations, and regarded it as routine work without the consequences that was meant to be. On the contrary, some teachers and students also practice it seriously. However, it would be too early to comment on whether the infusion of values have brought changes in the children thoughts and acts, as fragile human minds tends to fluctuate very often. Karma and Ken (2013, p14) states, “*it is difficult to 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.*”

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