

# CULTURAL CONTINUITY AND SCHOOL EDUCATION IN BHUTAN: CURRENT INITIATIVES, CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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## ABSTRACT

*Globalization can promote cultural understanding and empathy among nations and spread the values of democracy and diversity. It also - and paradoxically so - homogenizes cultures and causes the loss and disappearance of lesser known languages and their cultures, especially those that exist in the oral form. Fortunately in Bhutan, cultural preservation and promotion is pursued as one of the four pillars of the country's development philosophy of Gross National Happiness (GNH). Government policy recognizes children and teachers as the custodians of culture and the catalysts of cultural transmission, respectively. They are therefore the key to addressing the cultural consequences of globalization and ensuring intergenerational continuity and influence of the Bhutanese cultural heritage. Policy envisages that the "country's rich traditions, values, ideals and beliefs must ideally live on in the minds of Bhutanese youths [youth]", so that these traditions continue to inspire their thoughts and actions and enable them to make "ethical and moral choices" in their lives (GNHC, 2009a, p. 20). Since teachers' influence has a direct bearing on the students' lives, their role is considered vital for instilling in young people an understanding and appreciation of Bhutanese culture and heritage through the curricula they study in school and university. These overarching policy visions influence the approach to school and tertiary education in Bhutan. The purpose of this paper is to highlight the interaction of culture and education in Bhutanese schools in light of current initiatives and to foster reflection and future action.*

**Keywords:** children, culture, cultural preservation curriculum, diversity, education, globalization, Gross National Happiness (GNH), pedagogy, values.

## INTRODUCTION

Often perceived as a land shrouded in myths, lore and legends - and now as a country in pursuit of happiness - in the high Himalayas, Bhutan is one of Asia's smallest nations with a population of less than a million people. Article 9 of Bhutan's Constitution states that "The state shall strive to promote those conditions that will enable the pursuit of Gross National Happiness ... the true and sustainable development of a good and compassionate society rooted in Buddhist ethos and universal human values". Bhutan's development philosophy of Gross National Happiness (GNH) is founded on the values of sustainable economic growth, environmental conservation, promotion of cultural heritage, and good governance (MOE, 2009, p.10; RGOB, 2013, p. vii).

Guided by this goal, the process of development - social, economic, environmental and political - is hinged on the need to create positive conditions that enable and maximize the experience of happiness (DPT, 2008, p. 13; PDP, 2008, p.

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4; RGOB, 1999, p. 45). Inevitably, education is considered imperative for effectively pursuing this national aspiration. In the Bhutanese context, therefore, it is difficult to discuss education and culture independently of each other because the two are inextricably linked, each reinforcing the other.

Culture and education, the wider context of this paper, are among the nine principal domains of GNH, the others being psychological well-being, health, time use, good governance, ecology, living standards, and community vitality (Ura, 2009, pp. 32-53). Significantly, the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage is also the third of the four pillars that support GNH. As this paper is centred on the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage through education, it is necessary to understand how culture relates to happiness. The policy perspective on happiness, for example, considers the preservation and promotion of culture as imperative for meeting the "spiritual and emotional needs of our people and in cushioning ourselves from some of the negative impacts of modernization" (RGOB, 2005, p. 70).

While culture is a highly contested term, in this paper it is considered in the context of policy. Viewed from the policy perspective, cultures manifest in two forms, the physical form and the abstract form, often known as 'tangible' and 'intangible' cultures respectively. While the tangible forms are to be seen in terms of customs, crafts, rituals, symbols, traditional sports, astrology, folklore, myths, legends, poetry, drama, to mention a few (RGOB, 1999, p. 65), the intangible forms include values, norms, attitudes, worldviews, moral and ethical choices, sense of right and wrong, among others (RGOB, 1999, p. 65). Although not very different from the tangible-intangible mode of differentiation, Ura (2009, p. 53) considers two categories of culture within the culture domain of GNH. He classifies the more physical ones as 'actions and practices', including in it dialect proficiency, arts and architecture, traditional games and sports, *Tshechus* (festivals), and artisans, and the more abstract ones as "values" and includes in this category notions of identity, dignity, non-alienation, and diversity. This paper highlights the complementarities of two important dimensions of the philosophy of Gross National Happiness - culture and education.

## **EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN BHUTAN**

Although modern education with structured curricula and pedagogies (influenced largely by the epistemology of monastic training) began in Bhutan as early as 1913 during the reign of its first King (MOE, 2013a, p. xvii-xxiv), a formal system of secular education as a national initiative was introduced only in the 1960s. The latter period was a time in Bhutanese history when the country opened itself up to the outside world, introduced social, political and judicial reforms, and launched its first economic development plan.

With the launch of planned development initiatives, the need to engage its citizens in nation building, and increased interaction with the global community, the urgency to develop its human resource capability was felt like never before. Accordingly, in 1965 Bhutan's first public school - Thimphu Public School - was established with English as the medium of instruction (MOE, 2013a, p. xxiv). The following decades saw the establishment of schools and higher education institutions throughout the country. For example, a teacher training institute was established in 1968 in Samtse in south Bhutan which became a degree granting institution in 1984. Earlier in 1983, Sherubtse College in East Bhutan had become the country's first university college offering undergraduate courses. In 2003, the Royal University of Bhutan was established as a federated national university with the aim to "promote the cultural enrichment, personal development and wellbeing" of the Bhutanese people (RUB, 2008, p. 2).

Beginning in the 1960s with only a few schools for the entire country, Bhutan's educational system has developed by leaps and bounds. Today the country has a well developed educational system that provides free education to all children of school-going age up to tenth standard and access to university education. For example, the Royal University of Bhutan alone provides opportunities for higher education to about 30% of the Kingdom's higher secondary graduates. It has also achieved 95 per cent primary school enrolment (MOE, 2013a, p. xiii), thus responding extremely well to the UN millennium development goal of education for all. As compared with only one school in 1914 and just a few in the 1960s, Bhutan today has over 2000 educational institutions, including primary, middle and secondary schools, vocational institutes, early childhood care and development centres, continuing education centres, non-formal education centres, extended classrooms, special institutes, higher education institutions, and others (MOE, 2013a).

## **EDUCATING FOR GROSS NATIONAL HAPPINESS**

Today, the country's national vision of education is to see the development of "an educated and enlightened society of *gyalyong gacid pelzom* [Gross National Happiness], at peace with itself, at peace with the world, built and sustained by the idealism and the creative enterprise of our citizens" (MOE, 2013b, p. v). As evident in the country's national vision of education as well as the Royal University of Bhutan's institutional goal of "cultural enrichment, personal

development and wellbeing" (RUB, 2008, p. 2), the transmission and internalization of the country's rich cultural values is an indispensable element of school and tertiary education in Bhutan. In 2009 the Bhutanese government declared that infusing the values and principles of Gross National Happiness into the country's educational system was a top priority (MOE, 2009, p. 11). Accordingly, in December of the same year, a groundbreaking international 'Educating for Gross National Happiness Workshop' was held in Thimphu (Bhutan's capital) where, according to then Education Minister Thakur S. Powdyel, "some of the finest minds from some sixteen countries engaged in holistic education, eco-literacy, indigenous knowledge, sustainable development together with some of Bhutan's well-known educators" reflected on "an educational paradigm supportive of Gross National Happiness" (MOE, 2013a, pp. 50-51). In 2010, a nationwide education for GNH programme was launched through training of school leaders who in turn trained the teachers. Today, the 'Educating for GNH' policy requires all schools in Bhutan to develop into "Green Schools". One of the eight dimensions of a Green School is "cultural greenery", the others being environmental, intellectual, academic, social, spiritual, aesthetic, and moral greenery. Infusion of the cultural dimension into school education manifests in activities such as projects related to cultural identity and dignity, heritage, art and craft, art and architecture, performing arts, local wisdom, belief systems, community dialects, cultural diversity, mindfulness and meditation, among others (DCRD, 2011, pp. 18-19). For example, most classes in schools in Bhutan commence their day's academic learning with a moment of silence so that the students and teachers are together able to cultivate positive intentions and motivations for their own learning as well as for their relationship with others in the community. Hence, a unique characteristic of Bhutan's education system is the role of culture and its articulation in educational policy, curricula, and teaching practice. In spite of the overarching emphasis on culture, like all small societies, Bhutan faces the many challenges and tensions that come with the advantages of globalization.

### **GLOBALIZATION AND ITS IMPACT ON CULTURE AND EDUCATION**

The positive impact of globalization is evident in all imaginable spheres of growth and development such as education, culture, diplomacy, trade, travel, and communications, to name a few. But the forces that accompany it also especially impinge on small and vulnerable cultures and languages in different parts of the world, including Bhutan (GNHC, 2009b, pp. 161-162). Bhutanese cultures and languages are not immune to the insinuating and homogenizing effects of globalization. In fact, the Bhutanese government recognizes that:

*A major challenge for conserving the country's rich culture will be to minimize the effects of globalization that tends to homogenize diverse and rich cultures and causes people's cultural identity to wither often resulting in a dissolution of local languages, knowledge, beliefs and practices.*

(GNHC, 2009a, p. 161).

Thus, the ability to maintain and assert a unique cultural identity is considered imperative for Bhutan's continued existence as a nation. In fact, cultural heritage is considered the very "foundation upon which the identity of the people and the country as a sovereign and an independent nation is built" (Planning Commission, 2002, p. 28; RGOB, 1999, p. 44). Since it is in the nature of globalization to displace and homogenize cultures, especially small cultures with small populations, the Bhutanese government emphasizes the value of cultural diversity (see RGOB, 1999, p. 35). Implied is the acknowledgement that in spite of its smallness, Bhutanese society has a rich diversity of cultures (see GNHC, 2009a, p. 161) that must be preserved and promoted.

Lo Bianco (2001, p. 469) says, "Globalization is making nations porous. The boundaries are being lowered and the content is being transformed". So the challenge of keeping languages and cultures alive is by no means small (see also GNHC, 2009a, p. 161). Given its geographical location between two of the world's cultural giants - India and China, each with a population of over a billion people, the challenge is even bigger. Moreover, exposure to the outside world influences people's worldviews and their perceptions about language and culture. In spite of its small size and population, Bhutan has a "diverse linguistic heritage" consisting of nineteen different languages spoken in different parts of the country (Gyatso, 2004, p. 265; van Driem, 2004, pp. 294-295). Apart from the rich legacy of tangible cultures that influence the everyday life of Bhutanese people, many of these languages carry a rich and diverse tradition of oral cultures such as spiritual poetry, epics, morals and ethics, legends, ballads, sayings and proverbs, spiritual songs, and heroic tales (RGOB, 1999, p. 65). School and university curricula, formal as well as informal, are active and dynamic sites for keeping these cultures and their values alive.

## CULTURAL CONTINUITY THROUGH EDUCATION

Culture and education are inextricably linked. As stated in *Bhutan 2020: A Vision for Peace, Prosperity and Happiness* (RGOB, 1999, pp. 20 & 36), government policy recognizes children and teachers as the custodians of culture and the catalysts of cultural transmission, respectively. They are therefore the key to addressing the cultural consequences of globalization and ensuring intergenerational continuity and influence of the Bhutanese cultural heritage. Policy envisages that the “country’s rich traditions, values, ideals and beliefs must ideally live on in the minds of Bhutanese youths [youth]”, so that these traditions continue to inspire their thoughts and actions and enable them to make “ethical and moral choices” in their lives (GNHC, 2009a, p. 20). Since teachers’ influence has a direct bearing on the students’ lives, their role is considered vital for “inculcating in our children and young people an understanding and appreciation of our culture and heritage” (RGOB, 1999, p. 20). For example, these overarching policy visions influence the school English curricula as they do the other domains of learning such as mathematics, history, economics, media literacy, civics, and Dzongkha the national language. For example, the curriculum states that materials selected for “reading and literature” (including short stories, essays and poetry), listening and speaking, and writing should be based on “Bhutanese culture”, encompassing “examples”, and the “values of Bhutanese culture” (CAPSD, 2005e, pp. 101-102; CAPSD, 2005f, pp. 33-34). Accordingly, curriculum reform in the past decade has ensured that Bhutanese children are sufficiently exposed to materials from Bhutanese history, literature, culture and society and that these are included the school syllabi, which in turn will inform classroom practice, including the way children learn and are assessed.

From the Bhutanese government policy perspective, cultural preservation and promotion best happens in the school through what children learn (GNHC, 2009a, p. 20; RGOB, 1999, p. 36). It says:

*If our culture and heritage is to continue to survive and flourish, our young people must understand and accept their role as custodians of a distinctive culture and the values and principles on which it is founded.*

The opportunity as well as challenge for school and university education in Bhutan will, therefore, be to translate the wise policy aspirations concerning cultural preservation and promotion into effective curricular enactments, authentic teaching, learning and assessment, and uniquely Bhutanese models of learning environment characterized by the values of respect, inclusiveness, identity, diversity, inner and outer wellbeing.

## INTERACTION OF CULTURE, CURRICULA AND CLASSROOM PRACTICE

From the policy perspective, the role of teachers and students is considered crucial for preserving and promoting the cultural heritage (see RGOB, 1999, p. 20). Consistent with this view, many Bhutanese writers affirm the need to infuse school curricula with traditional values. For example, both Dorji (2002, p. 20) and Penjore (2005, p. 67) recommend inclusion of Bhutanese folk literature in the school curriculum. Zam (1991, p. 144) considers folktales “legitimate material” for use in Bhutanese classrooms as they can stimulate the learner’ enthusiasm and passion better than culturally unfamiliar materials. Some other writers suggest the need for preserving the oral traditions and passing them on to futurity (Acharya, 2004, p. ix; Choden, 2002, p. xv; Dorji, 2002, p. 20; Powdyel, 2005a, p. 4). Bhagwati (2008, p. 116) in ‘*In Defense of Globalization*’ (2008) concludes that indigenous cultures cannot be impervious to the forces of globalization. He argues that “Only active nurturing of the collective memory and a selective preservation of cultural artifacts can be a response, not the impractical fossilization of traditional attitudes and values”. Bhutanese scholars present alternative perspectives that are quite different from Bhagwati’s. Choden (1997, p. ix), for example, says:

*It is unfortunate that the modern world must always have tangible and empirical evidence. As a result of this it misses the opportunity to share much of the folklore and mystery that are as old as the Himalayas. Today, we are caught at the crossroads of traditionalism and modernity; we must not sacrifice our fields of experience for fear of exposing ourselves as backward under the scrutiny of the modernists’ glare.*

Similarly, Powdyel (2005b p. iv), writing about a book on Bhutanese beliefs and superstitions, says that its publication happens at a time “when the tide of modernization is sweeping across our country, often dislodging the inherited wisdom” and the “myriad strands of our beliefs and practices” are “taken for granted”. Seen from Choden’s and Powdyel’s perspectives, the meaning of culture goes beyond ‘artifacts’ and fossilized attitudes and values and

encompasses non-material and non-measurable values such as “inherited wisdom”, “beliefs and practices”, “folklore and mystery”, and “our fields of experience”. Unlike Bhagwati, Pennycook (1998, p. 217) advocates the need for a genre of writing that articulates “both counter-discursive arguments and alternative realities” and shows “alternative representations, alternative stories, and alternative possibilities” made available in school classrooms and teaching materials.

In Bhutan, the school is considered an active and dynamic site for children’s authentic experience of culture where knowledge and appreciation of cultural values are fostered. For example, in the English curricula for schools, the importance of learning English in a cultural context is emphasized so that students are able to reflect on the “cultural values of Bhutan” as well as those of other countries. Implied here is that learning opportunities and experiences must be created in the enacted curriculum, especially in the teaching strategies that English teachers use in their classroom practice for students to develop these understandings. The school, its formal and informal curricula, and teaching and learning environment, therefore, become important sites for learning cultural values. The role of teachers is equally important, if not more. Rightly so, their facilitative role in the transmission of cultural values to children has been emphasized in policy documents and in the curriculum literature.

The curricular reforms that were initiated in the first decade of this century were largely set against the backdrop of “globalization and its attendant pressures and impact” and the increasing emphasis placed on the role of the tangible and intangible forms of culture in the education of children, including the values of identity, diversity (GNHC, 2009a, p. 161), and recognition of and respect for “cultural differences” (RGOB, 1999, p. 66). To illustrate, the English curricula for grades 11 and 12 emphasize students’ understanding of “the notions of spirituality, love, understanding, impermanence, tolerance and patriotism”, “ageing, self knowledge, and language and culture” (CAPSD 2005c, p. 4; CAPSD, 2005d, p. 3). Apparently, the cultural emphases reflect the influence of Buddhist spiritual concepts (e.g. impermanence), notions of loyalty to country, and the importance of language and culture. Similarly, the grade 9 and 10 English curricula emphasize the need for the students to not only cultivate values that reflect Bhutanese way of life, to learn Bhutanese culture and “religious practices” (CAPSD, 2000, p. v) but also to develop understanding and appreciation of “their own culture as well as the cultures of others through the study of prescribed texts” (CAPSD, 1996, p. 74). For example, the grade 9 and 10 English curricula state that:

*Through their reading, graduates have studied and reflected on the cultural values of Bhutan and other countries, particularly the different ways in which people discover meaning in their lives; different expressions of fundamental values of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty*

(CAPSD, 2005a, p. 3; CAPSD, 2005b, p. 3).

The same emphasis is made in the English curricula for grades 7 to 10 (CAPSD, 2006b, p. xiv; CAPSD, 2006c, p. xiv; see also CAPSD, 2005f, p. xii).

In spite of the efforts already made, there are challenges that need to be addressed. Paradoxically, as Bhutanese writers generally point out, children are not exposed adequately to Bhutanese folk literature, an important carrier of cultural values, and that children are often “reared on folktales from distant places at the expense of local ones, which could begin a process of alienation from the local culture” (Choden, 2002, p. vi). Similarly, Penjore’s (2005, pp. 68-69) study of the values education curricula for grades 7 and 8, ‘Teaching Learning to Be: Suggested Values Education Lessons’ (CAPSD, 2001) found the syllabus ‘deficient’ because all of the texts included in the syllabus for teaching the target values such as honesty, responsibility, loyalty, unity, and obedience/respect - were from drawn from literatures of other countries (see CAPSD, 2001, pp. 68-91). Clearly, this calls for careful assessment of the linkage between policy intent, educational practice (e.g. curricular reform), and improved classroom pedagogies. These are no mean challenges.

The challenge, therefore, especially in the absence of evidence based research, is to understand the link between policy intent and the reality that exists in the schools which enables reflection and future intervention.

### **CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN CURRICULA AND PEDAGOGY**

Respect for diversity is an important element of the cultural dimension of a ‘Green School’. According to government policy:

*Part of the nation's rich cultural traditions are to be found in the diversity that exists within the Kingdom. Although we share a common worldview and sense of purpose, cultural differences within the nation are considerable, with each ethnic group making its own distinctive contribution to our living past. There are differences in folklore, myths, legends, dance, poetry and crafts that together add richness to the nation's cultural tapestry*

(RGOB, 1999, p. 35).

Bhutanese scholars affirm the value of diversity. For example, Powdyel (2005a, p.257) underscores the elements of "respect", "humanity", and "cultural responsibilities" which enable a person to recognize the "sanctity and sensitivities of other cultures". Ura (2009, p. 53) adds cultural "diversity" to the cultural domain of Gross National Happiness and says "The members of a cultural group add diversity to the otherwise imploding and homogenising world". Children are taught to respect diversity in school, and there are advantages. First, when cultural differences are recognized and respected and children feel appreciated, they develop mutual understanding and respect for each other. Second, when children are exposed to diverse cultural materials from different parts of the country, they develop the ability to understand and appreciate diversity better than they would theoretically. It develops positive feelings in children when they see their cultures appreciated or valued by others. The challenge, though, especially in absence of empirical studies in on the linkage policy intent and classroom practice, seems to be to gain a full understanding of how the concept of cultural diversity plays out in classroom discourse as well as in the myriad situations of the school's informal or hidden curricula. Hayes et al. (2007, pp. 68-69) say that "Curriculum knowledge that is constructed and framed within a common set of cultural definitions, symbols, values, views and qualities - and thus attributing some higher status to it - stands in contrast to" the curriculum's claims to valuing cultural knowledges. Given the linguistic and cultural diversity that exists in Bhutan and the importance attached to it in government policy, it is important that teachers' beliefs, attitudes and professional practices concerning diversity are understood through empirical studies.

## CONCLUSIONS

Bhutan views cultural preservation and promotion as imperative for maintaining the country's unique identity in the world. Given the diversity and richness of the country's cultural heritage, including the oral traditions that exist in its many different languages, the need to preserve the heritage is a genuine one as much as it is urgent. Fortunately, the Bhutanese educational system is already taking a number of strategic steps to integrate modern education with the country's rich culture by articulating the role of culture in policy, the school curricula, and transferring these to the teachers' classroom pedagogies. This makes teachers the catalysts of cultural transmission. However, emphasis on culture in curriculum policy must be matched by effective classroom practice that helps children to develop deep understanding and appreciation of culture. Without this, it is possible that mere quantitative presence of cultural material in the curricula is interpreted as a polite gesture to policy without much commitment, while qualitative presence, it is assumed, provides the valorization of the content in question to be actually taught and assessed. Although important roles are attributed to teachers and students and efforts are made to infuse school education with the fundamental values and principles of Gross National Happiness, in the absence of empirical studies, the real impact of these interventions is not yet known. This calls for classroom based studies that explore teachers' and students' knowledge and perceptions of the educating for GNH initiatives and programmes in Bhutanese schools. Part of the study could employ action research methods that assess positive change in knowledge and attitudes over time as a result of the interventions. It is, therefore, important to see how the teachers' classroom practices (including their approach to assessment) reflect the important role culture is assigned in the school curricula. In understanding the role attributed to cultural values in school curricula, it is important to understand that inclusion in the syllabus alone may not reflect the importance attached to it unless it is taught and assessed. Documenting best practices from Bhutan's unique approach to school education may have the potential to present to the world an alternative educational paradigm inspired by the country's development philosophy of Gross National Happiness.

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