GROSS NATIONAL HAPPINESS EDUCATION IN THE COLLEGES OF EDUCATION, BHUTAN: PERCEPTION, CULTURE, IMPACT AND CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

This study was situated in the two teacher education colleges of the Royal University of Bhutan. It examined whether the teacher education system and policies are in congruence with the Gross National Happiness (GNH) education. It is envisaged that education embodied with GNH values will not only act as an agent of change but also ensure that the country’s education system embodies and reflects GNH values and principles. The study employed mixed method approach. The participants for the survey consisted of 62 lecturers from the two colleges of education namely Samtse College of Education [SCE] and Paro College of Education [PCE] (SCE-32 & PCE-30). The sample was representative of the population (n=120) and so was other variables such as teaching subjects, age, experience and qualification as more than 50% of the population responded to the survey. To garner qualitative data thirteen lecturers (PCE-7 & 6-SCE) were interviewed and lessons of eight lecturers (SCE-5 & PCE-3) teaching Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) and Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PgDE) students were observed. Results revealed that lecturers in general have a positive perception of GNH education in the colleges of education as it aids the colleges in inculcating moral and cultural values and care for the environment in the future teachers (heart), the modules both professional and core modules including pedagogy and assessment offered at the colleges of education are laden with GNH values (Head), and GNH education is also built into co-curricular activities (Hand). However, the lecturers have mixed reactions on whether GNH education should be made compulsory programme in the colleges of education.

Keywords: Gross National Happiness Education; Colleges of Education; Bhutan; Pedagogy; Values; Co-curricular Activities; Modules

INTRODUCTION

Bhutan, a tiny Himalayan Kingdom is sandwiched between China in the north and India in the south. It has a population of 779,666 [1] with a literacy rate of 60%, and an unemployment rate of 3.1% [2]. The results of the alternative
development path, based on a distinctly Bhutanese strategy propounded by His Majesty the Fourth King of Bhutan that aims to develop Gross National Happiness (GNH) instead of Gross National Product (GNP), have until now been positive for the country. For instance, the average life expectancy of Bhutanese rose from 35 years in 1961 to 70.57 in 2017, the living standards of its population, which a few decades ago was one of the poorest in the globe, has experienced a sharp rise in living standard, while school enrolment, estimated at 0.2% in 1961, jumped to 72% in 2017.

Education has played a key role in this process. The First King of Bhutan, Sir Ugyen Wangchuk opened the first school in Bhutan in Haa Dzongkhag in 1914 offering subjects such as Hindi (national language of India), Maths and Dzongkha. English became the medium of instructions in the schools of Bhutan in 1960s during the reign of the Third King of Bhutan (1952-1972). The education system offered from 1960 onwards has been branded as modern education within the purview of overall national development. With the introduction of English, Science and other disciplines were also introduced in the schools with English as the medium of instruction. Cognisant of the importance of English as an international language, the Third King believed that modern education would not only help to build networks with the rest of the world, but also develop human resources for the socio-economic development of the country [3]. According to Dorji [4], English was adopted as the medium of instruction in Bhutan to network with other countries as English was already the lingua franca of the world. It has also been noted that this was perhaps necessary for the socio-economic and educational needs of the country.

Since then the number of schools increased year after year. From a handful of schools and students in the early 1960s, Bhutan now has 1794 schools, institutes, non-formal centers, day care centers and 212,326 students [5] and its own local curriculum and teachers. Bhutan established its first university, Royal University of Bhutan (RUB) in 2003. The RUB has eight federated colleges offering various programmes located at different parts of the country. Two of the eight colleges are teacher training colleges namely Paro College of Education (PCE) and Samtse College of Education (SCE). SCE was established as the first Teacher Training Institute (TTI) in the country in 1968 by the Third King of Bhutan to breed home grown teachers. Prior to the establishment of TTI, the teachers in the schools in Bhutan were expatriates except for handful of Bhutanese who were trained in India. Gradually as the need to train secondary teachers was felt the college diversified its programme to secondary teacher education both in science and humanities. Today the college caters to a number of programmes both at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

Owing to the need of more teachers for the fast-growing school system in the country, a second College of Education was introduced in the country in 1975 at Paro. Anchored on College’s vision of Lead in GNH Inspired Education, the
college offers myriad of programmes both regular and distance at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

Value Education and Educating for Gross National Happiness

The importance of value education in the Bhutanese Education System was emphasized as early as 1980s as reflected in the Curriculum Handbook for Schools [6]. The Bhutanese education system emphasizes value education through its exclusive approach called ‘Educating for GNH’ [7] which is referred to as ‘GNH Education’ for this study [8]. The Ministry of Education posits that it is imperative for every Bhutanese to consciously embrace GNH values and principles to achieve GNH as the leaders and government consider GNH to be the bridge between material development and the “fundamental values of kindness, equality and humanity” [9].

It was only in 2010 after the GNH workshop for school leaders and few selected teacher educators, GNH was introduced in the schools in Bhutan. Following the GNH workshop, Curriculum Handbook for Schools [6] identified key elements to transform all schools into GNH schools by improving i) School leadership and management practices; ii) Green schools for green Bhutan; iii) Curriculum (strengthening teaching and classroom management practices); iv) Student assessment (formative and summative); v) Extra-curricular activities; vi) School-community relationship; and vii) Qualities of a GNH graduate.

Subsequent to the GNH workshop in Paro, schools were urged to promote each of the above elements starting from 2010 school academic year. Three years since the introduction of GNH Education in the Bhutanese school system, to find empirical evidence on whether the schools are able to implement GNH Education in the schools, a study was carried out by Kezang Sherab, Assistant Professor from Paro College of Education as a PhD study. His mixed method study investigated perceptions and experiences of school leaders and teachers in their effort to integrate GNH education, perceptions of importance, support mechanisms, actions and impacts. The key findings revealed that while there was some progress made in imparting GNH values, principles and practices since its implementation in 2010, there were some inconsistencies among schools [8].

The heads of two teacher training colleges (Paro and Samtse) along with few lecturers also attended the GNH workshop in 2009-2010 at Paro but there were no mandates for the colleges of education (CoEs) to incorporate GNH Education in their programmes. Since GNH Education has been implemented in the schools, it is imperative for the colleges of education to see whether the programmes at the CoEs has any elements of GNH Education and if yes, to what extent, actions, impacts and challenges faced in incorporating GNH Education. Such study would aid the CoEs to incorporate GNH Education in their programmes as teachers trained are the immediate educational change agents who would be school
principals and teachers later. The CoEs can use a ‘train-the-trainers’ model to initiate change and help raise the efficacy beliefs of future teachers and principals. Not much research has been conducted on the relationship between the present Bhutanese teacher educational system and policies and GNH Education.

Research Questions

In order to explore those issues, the following guiding questions were posed:
1. What is the perception of teacher educators towards Gross National Happiness Education?
2. How much of GNH Education (values) are incorporated in co-curricular activities and academic programmes?
3. What are the challenges to establishing a teacher educational system and policies that are consistent with the Gross National Happiness Education?

Brief Review of the Concept of Gross National Happiness - Bhutan’s Own Path

The term Gross National Happiness was first pronounced by His Majesty King Jigme Singye Wangchuck as a fundamental principle of Bhutan’s development philosophy in early 1970s when he was still a teenage monarch [10]. This idea was contrast to that dominant idea of development focused on Gross Development Product in many countries. GNH calls for a balanced, holistic approach to development, harmonizing environmental, cultural and spiritual values, good governance, and economic growth. The concept of GNH has evolved as a reaction to the experiences of other developing countries.

The GNH philosophy has inspired much interest across the globe since its first GNH international seminar held at Thimphu in 2004 which engaged scholars in intellectual dialogue to help Bhutan to operationalize the concept of GNH [8, 11]. The subsequent international seminars in Canada (2005), Thailand (2007), Bhutan (2008) and Brazil (2009) has generated more comprehensive understanding of this philosophy [8]. GNH is underpinned by Buddhist philosophy and scholars from various disciplines [12] acknowledge the wisdom of Buddhism as applicable to all human activities including economic activities. A Buddhist equivalent of a ‘Social Contract’ declared in Bhutan in 1675 states that happiness of all sentient beings and teachings of Buddha are mutually dependent [13].

In brief, GNH philosophy has evolved to counteract the perceived shortcomings of the conventional economic activities and as a result bring more happiness on this ever degenerating planet. GNH is promoted through the four pillars namely sustainable and equitable socio-economic development; preservation and sustainable use of environment; preservation and promotion of cultural heritage; and good governance [13]. In order to achieve the four pillars of GNH, nine domains targeted by 72 indicators were introduced.
METHODOLOGY

This study employed mixed method involving both quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis. The tools employed were questionnaire using 5 point Likert-scale with a neutral point at the center for teacher educators (n=62) to measure the knowledge of teacher educators on GNH education, and type of support system for GNH education [8]; lesson observation (n=8) to gauge the extent of GNH values infused in the classroom teaching and problems associated with it; and individual face to face interview with teacher educator’s (n=13) to get their in-depth views on GNH education and associated problems. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS version 22 for quantitative data and presented in terms of mean and SD, qualitative data were analysed based on emergent themes. Efforts were made to triangulate the data. Approval to conduct research was obtained from the College Research Ethics Committee (Approval no 28/SCE-RESEARCH/2017-2018/068 dated 10/4/2018).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section presents whether the current teacher education system is in congruence with the Gross National Happiness education through: i) teacher educators’ perception of GNH education; ii) teacher educators’ knowledge on GNH education; iii) GNH education in the academic and non-academic activities; and iv) challenges in establishing teacher education system in consistence with GNH education.

Demographic Characteristics

The participants for the survey consisted of 62 lecturers from the two colleges of education (SCE-32 & PCE-30). The sample is representative of the population (n=120) and so with other variables such as teaching subjects, age, experience and qualification as more than 50% of the population responded to the survey. To garner qualitative data thirteen lecturers (PCE-7 & 6-SCE) were interviewed and lessons of eight lecturers (SCE-5 & PCE-3) teaching B.Ed and PgDE students were observed.

Teacher Educator’s Perception of GNH Education

Gross National Happiness education is perceived in a myriad of ways by different lecturers. For some GNH education refers to creating an environment where students feel that they are wanted and welcomed. For example, Lecturer 3 (LEC3) expressed that, “GNH education refers to a situation where students look
forward to come to the class and attend lectures and not take it as a burden or get bored by the lecture or the lecturer.”

Consistent to the above findings, Dorji [14] asserts that “GNH inspired classroom call for decisive actions that would cull for student’s rowdy behaviour and create conducive learning environment”. For instance, he reported that students take pleasure in mocking and laughing at their friends for failing to respond to the teacher’s question in the classroom and shatter their dreams of building confidence and self-esteem.

For many, GNH education is about inculcating positive values so that the students are developed into a complete human being. For instance, LEC7 expressed that, ‘To me GNH education is a kind of education that will help me develop students into a very good human being with basic human values such as kindness, compassion, love, care, and other human qualities’.

For others, it is about bringing wholesome growth to the child. For instance, LEC1 expressed: ‘The education that will bring about wholesome development of the students by embedding in curricular and co-curricular activities such as sporting events, religious discourse, clubs, events, etc. It would bring out building about an individual’s social, physical, emotional, and mental development. The individual after the completion of their education should be able to survive and practice their rights and responsibilities. They should also bring happiness to others and the society to which he or she belongs.’

Similarly, the Ministry of Education [15] considers wholesome education to be one of the strategies to improve the quality of education and the values could be taught through daily school activities such as morning assembly, national celebrations and school festivities, and specialized programmes such as religious discourse, sporting events, clubs, career education, counselling and agriculture programme.

**Teacher Educator’s Knowledge of GNH Education**

The lecturers’ knowledge on GNH education is relatively high as apparent from high mean score (M=4.0; SD=0.80) from the survey data. It was also evident in most of the lessons observed that the lecturers’ teaching reflected their knowledge on GNH education, for instance, the tutor valuing students’ presence by taking attendance and conducting short meditation exercise to help students gain focus and get ready for the class (Observation 1, 16/7/2018, B.Ed English lesson). Other examples include asking students to be mindful of others by switching off phones in the class, tutor wearing a pleasant look throughout the lesson, creating a culture of learning through sharing of information, coming to consensus, developing team spirit and celebrating group achievements (Observation 2, 17/7/2018, PgDE Counselling lesson).

The lecturers in the interview subtly put in that they have GNH knowledge though they did not undergo any formal training in GNH education.
For instance, LEC5 expressed that “I think GNH values or education can be taught formally as well as informally if you are a good human being and I think it is not necessary to have a formal curriculum or training to deliver GNH education”. Further supported by LEC6 that “Though, I have not attended any workshops or trainings on GNH, I feel I have some knowledge of GNH and directly or indirectly, I have been imparting some GNH education to the students through different avenues”.

The above findings are consistent to the earlier findings that the self-efficacy beliefs of the lecturers of two CoE’s to role model GNH values were high (M=3.96; SD=0.63). Further, role modelling by the lecturer’s in their lessons were evident even in the lessons observed. For instance, role modelling consistent with GNH education was exhibited through practices, such as the tutors showing respect for the students, allowing students to interact willingly in the group work, showing patience while explaining difficult concepts, and respecting student’s views [16]. These attributes will have a strong positive implication as these teachers are more likely to replicate such teaching approaches to their own practices in the schools later.

However, Sherab’s study [8] on GNH education in Bhutanese schools contradicts the above findings that the school teachers had difficulty modelling appropriate behaviour and use positive feedback with school students which had the potential to negatively impact students.

GNH Values in the Curriculum

The qualitative data revealed that the curriculum offered at the colleges of education is laden with GNH education in the modules, pedagogy and assessment practices.

**Subject Module**

The interview with the lecturers on the presence of GNH component in the teaching modules opined that GNH values are very much embedded in the modules they teach for Master of Education (M.Ed), B.Ed and PgDE such as in languages, sciences, professional, arts and social sciences. For instance, LEC3, a Bhutanese language tutor expressed that: ‘All Dzongkha (national language of Bhutan) modules have GNH component embedded. A module called che dha jigten ghi namshak deals with how to tame mind, how to behave with others, what to think at times of difficulty. Dzongkha for Communication module- deals with how to communicate at different situations, how to deal with students at diverse situations such as students coming late to the class, and not attending to home assignments. Dzogkha EVS deals with taking responsibility, participation, respect for others, cooperation, etc.’
Similar views were expressed by English language tutors that the module in English deals with developing English competency and fluency of students in the use of language and also how they deliver at the schools upon their graduation from the college (LEC1). GNH values were also evident in science modules. For instance, LEC5 expressed that he deals with the importance of environment, the eco-system and need to protect environment so that flora and fauna can live in harmony in his biology lesson. LEC11, tutor of Chemistry talks about sustainable use of chemicals and its consequences if misused. Reporting scientific findings with integrity, environmental preservation, pollution and its consequences in her chemistry class. Similarly, LEC7, tutor in science education expressed that she involves her students in scientific study by making them to critically review science article or document, innovate teaching aids as she believes that - to be a critical thinker is also one of the GNH values.

The above findings are consistent to the earlier study at the college settings where GNH values are embedded into their academic teaching. For instance, Wangdi [17] asserts that PCE adopted GNH in the physical education classes so that the graduates become fit enough to scale the hilly terrains and brave the torrential rain to reach their schools in future upon their graduation from the college. He further reiterates that the importance of good health is a determinant of happiness. Happiness in Bhutanese context is often summed up in a popular statement of “lus lu na tsha med, sens lu sdug sngal med” which roughly translates to “no physical illness and no mental worries.” [18]. Therefore, every school that is serious about character education should have sports activities.

Assessment

The assessment of students’ work is also aligned with GNH education right from setting of semester question papers to minor assignments to project works including assessment and feedback. Most of the tutors expressed that when they prepare question for the semester examination, they set Higher Order Question which will enhance their critical thinking. For instance, LEC4 expressed, ‘When I prepare blueprint, I go for higher level questions for which students have to synthesize and think critically to answer those questions. So here the critical thinking component is being practiced’.

GNH education also features in the assignments and projects assigned to students. For instance, LEC5 expressed: ‘If I talk about my modules, giving assignment based on the Place-based Education is a value based lesson where they are required to interact with the community, have firsthand observation of what is going on in the environment. For example, learning about how waste is generated, its effect on the community, and how waste can be managed. I also teach ecology which deals with the protection and preservation of environment and species that thrives in the environment. The task that I give develops their
personality, team spirit, organizational, research, and leadership skills.’ Such positive values are inculcated in the students which is the component of GNH.

The above views are further echoed by LEC10: ‘One of the things that we do in relations to assessment is that of group work or collaborative learning or cooperative learning among the students. I think this is very much ingrained in most of the modules so that people can understand that GNH is more about collaboration rather than competition, working in teams and more about becoming creative and reflective thinkers. These are some of the areas that we address in our assessment’.

Pedagogy

GNH education is also infused in the pedagogy practiced by majority of the lecturers in the two colleges of education. For instance, LEC1 expressed: ‘According to GNH education, class should be such where everybody feels free and comfortable. Before I begin my lesson, I go around to ensure whether everybody is comfortable or not, see whether everybody is present in the class not being inquisitive about their absence but to show my concern as to why they could not attend the class. I start my lesson with the thought for the day which is value laden and moreover they are required to reflect on it at least for the day if not later. I also carry out 3-4 minutes of mindful practice/meditation with a sheer purpose of gaining attention and focus for the class. I also make my lesson participatory, ensuring that everyone is comfortable, happy, and enjoy being in the class and develop passion for learning. I organize my lesson giving them group work, making them to lead discussion, presentation, opportunity to discuss and learn from each other with the aim to make them responsible citizens. The fact that we are training these teachers to be caring, responsible itself is GNH’.

Similarly, learning students’ names and calling by their names in the education college gives a feeling among students that their lecturers care them. Such exercises facilitate caring and trusting atmosphere in the class [19]. He further posits that when the tutors take attendance and ask reasons of the students for missing class on the previous class assures tutors care and concern for the students. In addition, strategies such as flip classroom and academic support from the learning center were also employed with student teachers in the college setting. For instance, students were assigned reading materials in advance to be discussed in the class next day. Students having difficulty in comprehending the article or problem with writing availed support from the learning center [19]. Furthermore, there are success stories accrued in terms of students learning in a college research class through the use of popular strategies such as carousel, museum walk, weaving the web, ACID, 321, problem solving, group work, and individual work [19].
Co-Curricular Activities

Co-curricular activities in the past were organized mainly to promote traditional and moral values to bring wholesome development in the students in the schools. Recently with the introduction of GNH education in the schools in Bhutan co-curricular activities became platform to infuse GNH values and principles. The colleges of education too attach a lot of importance to co-curricular activities as GNH principles and values are critical attributes of a beginning teacher.

Co-curricular activities based on various sporting disciplines, cultural activities community services, and literary activities form part of daily activities in the college. Most of the lecturers in the interview mentioned the importance of co-curricular activities in promoting GNH values. For example, traditional games such as Khuru and archery and traditional dance and songs associated with it help preserve and promote our culture and tradition. From such avenues, students and others pick up songs and dances and sustained it for the future which in a way promotes one of the pillars of GNH (LEC4). These activities have also inculcated communication skills and leadership skills in students which is very essential for the would be teachers later as expressed by LEC10: ‘We organize numerous co-curricular activities in the college such as games and sports, cultural activities, and field trips. I think one of the things that our college is doing well is the Tarayana club. This club goes to the field to provide service. For example, they visit monastery, community to clean the environment and create awareness on issues like health and sanity. By engaging in these kinds of activities student get to understand the real nature of humanity. Such as what kind of person they are. When they engage in these kind of community services, they obviously inculcate values such as teamwork, unity, leadership experience, ownership of things, develop communication skills, manage stress, etc.’

Other activities include social services such as Democracy club, Bhutan Toilet Organization and other voluntary club that give charity services and create awareness among community members on health and hygiene and promote community vitality. The involvement of students in the literary activities such as debates, staging Shakespearean shows customized in Bhutanese context, and inviting guest speakers to speak on the relevant topics teases young minds of the students and create awareness on current educational issues (LEC4).

Challenges in the Colleges of Education in Implementing GNH Education

When it comes to the implementation of GNH education in the colleges of education there is a mixed reaction among the lecturers. Some of the lecturers that I talked to during interview were in favour of the need to introduce GNH education in the CoEs as we need to sensitize the would be teachers with GNH values, principles and beliefs. For instance, LEC10 asserts that “The colleges of
education are the right place to offer training on GNH as they have to be a role model later while in the schools”.

While, some feel that GNH education should not be made compulsory programme in the colleges or should not offer GNH as a separate module as what the colleges are doing at the moment are enough in imparting GNH education. For instance, LEC8 argues that “I am one person who is convinced that what Bhutanese education is doing currently is GNH. Sometime there can be duplication or cross over so this is how I feel”. Few of them feel that GNH is a lofty term and it might drain all the energy and miss on the real business of education. For instance, LEC1 asserts that the concept of GNH is quite lofty as it is defined by different people differently. The colleges should be careful while infusing GNH education in the curriculum as it might drain all the energy and miss on other aspects. It should be done with right measures and right attitude. Similarly, the earlier study by [16] revealed that the lecturer’s perception on the challenges in implementing GNH education at the CoEs was relatively high (M=3.86; SD=0.47). This is attributed lack of required knowledge by teacher educators, lack of skills and strategies in explicitly infusing GNH values and principles.

CONCLUSIONS

Evidences from the study shows that the teacher educators were well aware of the GNH education though they did not attend any formal training. They consider GNH education very important as they train teachers who are the immediate educational change agents as school principals and teachers later. GNH education was evident both in the academic and non-academic activities of the CoEs. In the academic front GNH education mattered in varying pedagogical approaches to accommodate learners of different abilities, creating awareness on environmental preservation, inculcating critical and reflective thinking skills, creating conducive learning ambience in the classrooms. Likewise, teacher educators were also quite successful in incorporating GNH values through non-academic activities such as sports, clubs, cultural and other college events. However, if GNH education in the CoEs has to be robust then, a far-reaching curriculum development process is required into teacher education modules. Whether being offered as a separate module or as a theme running across all modules, it is imperative that the CoEs should implement GNH education in their programmes as trainers of teachers.

The study makes some important theoretical advances in the teacher education system. Firstly, this study confirms the findings of earlier study by Gyamtso et al. [16] that the teacher educator’s ability to role model GNH values to their students and their ability to infuse GNH values in their teaching is relatively high. Secondly, this study provides an insight into how GNH education is being incorporated by the CoEs in its academic and co-curricular activities for other
colleges under RUB to model. Finally, since this is the one of the few studies to explore the congruence between Bhutanese teacher educator’s system and GNH education. Knowledge generated from this study contributes to an understanding of how GNH education can respond to challenges in creating conducive learning environment for the students, inculcate values and leaderships skills in the students through academic and non-academic activities. In this research, the focus was on the perceptions of teacher educators of the two CoEs to the GNH initiatives and further research needs to be undertaken taking on board the views of the students. Furthermore, in this study, the infusion of the GNH education was more visible on the pedagogy and non-academic academics activities, further research is required to look into how GNH is integrated in the content building.

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