# Book Review

## Education in Bhutan: Culture, Schooling, and Gross National Happiness. By Matthew J. Schuelka and T.W. Maxwell (Eds.) (2016), 252pp. ISBN: 9789811016479, Singapore: Springer.

This well-published volume of 15 essays and research articles on the Bhutanese educational system is exciting and revealing on several levels simultaneously. Many if not most of the articles contain valuable information about the history of the educational system, information which is not easily available elsewhere in any comprehensive form. Some of the articles, though not all, discuss with greatly needed but highly unusual frankness the problems that have inhibited the development of Bhutanese education. Some of the articles, but again not all, hint in a suggestive manner at the intellectual “box canyon” into which Bhutanese education has worked itself. Finally, the articles, taken as a whole, are very revelatory, through what they do not discuss, of the great need for profound self-analysis and self-criticism if the educational system is to dig itself out of the doldrums in which it currently finds itself.

The Kingdom of Bhutan remained relatively isolated from the politically and economically more dynamic regions of Asia until after World War II. This isolation was never complete, of course, although later both Bhutanese publicists and foreign romantics too often liked to talk about Bhutan as “Shangri-La.” Until the years immediately after World War II, the country’s education system, if one can speak of it in a systematic fashion at all, was primarily monastic both institutionally and purposively and refracted the *relative* isolation of the country. This cannot be stressed enough because, while some of the articles in this volume seek to suggest a continuity between the traditional and modern educational systems, the fact of the matter is that they are so utterly different that the argument for continuity is difficult to establish and maintain. Everything changed after World War II, primarily because the total environment in which Bhutan existed changed.

From its very inception, modern education in the Kingdom faced problems with which, quite frankly, it still wrestles. These can be winnowed out from the articles in this volume. First, in the first decades of modern education the country lacked its own cadre of teachers and was heavily reliant on personnel drawn from outside the country, most famously from Canada but primarily from India. The struggle to replace Indian teachers with Bhutanese required the construction of teacher training colleges, but the existence of teacher training colleges did not solve the teacher problem.

Second, there was a total lack of textbooks, and, consequently, the reliance on Indian textbooks became overwhelming. This meant that at that time Bhutan really did not have control over the content of its own education; Indian textbooks were strongly geared to the promotion of Indian nationalism, which did not contribute to the intention of Bhutanese education. When, eventually, a center for writing textbooks was set up under the Bhutanese Ministry of Education, the quality of the product inhibited the advancement of educational achievement.

Third is the issue of the physical context of education. Outside of the capital, and often even inside it, the schools are often badly built, in wretched condition, and with very little budgetary provision for their maintenance. Class sizes are large by any standard in too many schools, in the boarding schools parents often have to come and cook and take care of the children, and in remote and sometimes not so remote areas the children have to walk long distances to and from school.

Fourth, and very broadly, the purpose (or purposes) of education in Bhutan remains a primary issue all too rarely discussed. In Bhutan, the problem of constructing a national identity for a tiny nation consisting of peoples speaking different languages, practicing different belief systems, in fact, different cultures, is, theoretically, a significant problem for the education system. It concerns nation-building itself. Education may be one of if not the only nationally institutionalized activity in which

the entire population participates during the formative years of life. One would expect considerable attention be paid throughout the education system to those subjects, language, history, literature, the arts, which would contribute to the construction of an identity into which all the children would grow with the process of becoming Bhutanese adults. And, indeed, sandwiched in cultures and societies that from the perspective of tiny Bhutan are potentially overwhelming, the issue of national identity through education should be very pressing. But it competes with education in the instrumentalities of modernisation, namely, maths, the sciences, business, and, in values, competitiveness. In the overall situation, given the lack of textbooks and modern literature appropriate for schoolchildren in the national language, together with the felt need to prepare future citizens for competition in the global market, the choice of English as the language of instruction makes a great deal of sense. But even the most patriotic modernists would have to admit that there is a certain inescapable contradiction between the purpose of education in nation-building and the choice of English as the language of instruction.

Fifth, and for the moment the last issue, is the "ideological" framework of education, which is no less important than any of the others. In fact, for reasons that can be clearly discerned in many of the articles in this volume, this is the primary, perhaps overwhelming, issue. As many of the articles make clear, Bhutanese education is guided by the principles of "Gross National Happiness" (GNH). For a decade now the Ministry of Education and other institutions associated with the educational enterprise have conducted conferences, teacher training sessions, curriculum revisions, all concerned with making GNH the heart and soul of Bhutanese education. GNH has, in fact, become the mark by which Bhutanese educators (not to mention politicians, tourism operators, bureaucrats, among others) want to distinguish the nation's educational system (and the nation itself) from all others. It is supposed to be the source of the values the children imbibe in the schools. GNH, as several of our authors make clear, derives from the fundamental Buddhist values that constitute the worldview of Bhutanese Buddhist culture. The only problem is that, despite all the conferences and teacher training sessions, nobody has figured out what the practical application of GNH is in education, not to mention in the rest of the society and economy. And concentration on GNH economics or business practices will not contribute to the competitiveness of Bhutanese in the world, or for that matter, in the national market, which the government loudly and endlessly proclaims is vital to the future.

At the moment, and I have no doubt but that this statement will be hotly contested, GNH is irrelevant to Bhutanese education, as an examination of rising rates of crime, drug abuse, and suicide, for example, among the nation's youth demonstrates. This is not the fault of the educators, bureaucrats, or the students. The problem is that nobody has been able to define the applicability of GNH to practical matters. The one exception may be the environment, and it is quite true that environmental studies play a not insignificant role at many levels of Bhutanese education. Even there, GNH is more a way of describing good environmental practice then it is a practice in and of itself. There are alternatives. For example, John Dewey's concept of education for democracy provides a very important pedagogical and philosophical foundation for rethinking Bhutanese education, but "democratic procedures" were introduced into Bhutan with little or no thought for the cultural support that would breath into those procedures real democratic life. Some instruction in the rituals of democracy, such as voting, does exist, but it is not supported by the kind of broad introduction into democratic culture and institutions that used to be represented in American education, for example, by civics classes. But here, as in so much else, the intrication of the educational system and society is all too obvious: when "democracy" was introduced into Bhutan by royal fiat in the first decade of the century, no attention was paid to the encouragement of democratic culture as John Dewey would have understood it. And it is precisely in this context that the purported role of GNH in education has become so pronounced: absent a focus on democratic culture, GNH has become the high-minded grounding for the education system. This is very apparent in the attention paid to it in this volume, but what is missing is the critical analysis of both the theory and practice of GNH that might throw more light on its function in education.

This book comes, as all books do, with its own implicit subtext, and readers should pay particular attention to that subtext, for which the various articles provide an excellent starting point. A subtle reading the article by Pema Tshomo, for example, "Conditions of Happiness: Bhutan's Educating for Gross National Happiness Initiative and the Capability Approach" (pp. 139-152) will give a nuanced and balanced insight into the importance of the relationship of the still-unrealized ideological purpose of Bhutanese education and its "objective existing reality."

Bhutan's "non-formal education" project is, without a doubt, a great achievement, and it is sensitively represented in this volume by former Minister of Education Thakur S. Powdyel's article (pp. 169-180). The final chapter, "Conclusion: Key Outcomes, Challenges, Ways Forward, and Future Research," by Maxwell and Schuelka (pp. 229-239) provides an efficient summary of the contents of the book and specifies many technical and professional issues. However, by and large, the issue of the content, the real theory and practice of GNH, an idea which is the core not only of this volume but, theoretically, of Bhutanese education itself, is nowhere critically analysed in this book. That task remains to be done.

What this volume lacks, most specifically, is a discussion of the material conditions of education, like the quality of the nutrition and physical health as well as the social support of the pupils, and, yes, the cleanliness of the toilets and the kitchens in the schools. If, as Pema Tshomo rightly says, a GNH education, "as a national educational goal, creates the conditions necessary to provide every individual with the freedom to develop to the best of his or her capabilities…" (p. 149), then surely a close analysis of the material conditions of education and how they contribute to, or deter, the attainment of that goal, is no less important than anything else discussed here. Another lacuna is the question of the type of personality to the formation of which the educational system necessarily contributes, that could be harmonious with a "GNH society." The cultivation of individualism in Western, particularly American, educational institutions is wholly suitable to the culture of competition that contemporary capitalism, with its emphasis on innovation and disruption, promotes. The implications of this question are far too deep and broad to examine further here, but if Bhutan does indeed look toward the creation of a "GNH society," then the education system must necessarily confront the social-psychological question with no less energy than it needs to confront its other issues.

His Majesty the Fifth King has always been, even as Crown Prince, an indefatigable champion arguing for the vital central importance and the improvement of Bhutanese education at all levels. This is his constitutional responsibility, on the one hand, but, on the other, it is his own personal passionate commitment to the young people who will construct and become the future of the nation. Education in Bhutan makes it very obvious that leadership and ideals are by no means lacking. Future accomplishment will require leadership›s willingness to examine critically the ideals it proclaims and to deal resolutely with the social-psychological dimensions of GNH and with the nitty-gritty of daily life and the living-and-teaching conditions that obtain in schools in Bhutan.

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