Navigating Learning in Bhutan, Land of the Thunder Dragon

Kathleen June Huck Stiles, University of California, Santa Barbara, 2009

ABSTRACT

This study examines the navigation process related to education in Bhutan. In the 1960’s Western education came to Bhutan which already had a Buddhist monastic education system and an informal system using traditional methodologies. Currently all aspects of society, including education, are being aligned to Bhutan’s development policy based on Gross National Happiness (GNH).

Data for this qualitative research study was collected through interviews in Bhutan and ongoing communication with Bhutanese educators and school reformers. Eight people educated only or first through traditional methodologies were interviewed as well as six who had a combination of Western and traditional education. Three common themes emerged across groups: 1) formal learning was seen as related to spiritual/moral development, 2) experiences of learning were associated with a sense of meaning and personal/internal motivation, and 3) alphabetic literacy was seen to be strongly related to formal learning. Also common to all groups was participation in some type of non-Western learning methodology. Further study of such experiences seems very relevant to creating an education system in Bhutan based on GNH.

The navigation processes of two education organizations in Bhutan were also compared and contrasted. Both face similar issues but have very different functions and goals. The Institute of Language and Cultural Studies (ILCS) began as a monastic school for lay people and is now part of the Royal University of Bhutan. In its process of change, it has retained its traditional languages and monastic curriculum while adding a more student-centered pedagogy, study of the English language, and technology.

The Royal Education Council (REC) is a temporary organization commissioned by the King to align the education system with GNH. The work of the REC is to reform the current imported Western style system to form a new system based on student-centered models which incorporates traditional values and prepares students to function in the broader world. Study of this navigation can inform Western educators about the conscious process of school reform.