

# Using a Policy of 'Gross National Happiness' to Guide the Development of Sustainable Early Learning Programs in the Kingdom of Bhutan: Aspirations and Challenges

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## Abstract

A national study on demand for early childhood care and development programs in Bhutan found strong support for development of a new early childhood care and development (ECCD) sector. A wide range of stakeholders participating in the study, including ministries of education and health, post-secondary institutions, private preschool providers, community management committees, parents and children, emphasized the goal of preschool to promote success in English-medium formal education. Promoting cultural traditions was also a priority, while developing children's proficiency in home languages was hardly mentioned. The study highlighted the changing needs of Bhutanese families in the current context of increasing urbanization, dual career parents, and a shift from extended to nuclear family homes. Recommendations derived from the study encouraged a *made in Bhutan* approach to ECCD policy, programs, and professional education. Subsequent to the study, the national education policy included plans for implementation of ECCD covering children from birth to 8 years old. To ensure the sustainability and cultural congruence of new programs and investments with the Kingdom's Gross National Happiness Policy, a *Gross National Happiness* Commission screened and approved the new National Education Policy, which the Ministry of Education is charged with implementing. The emergence of an ECCD sector in Bhutan points to the role that national aspirations and value-driven policies and review processes could play in maintaining language diversity and transmitting culturally based knowledge.

## Keywords

Bhutan, Gross National Happiness Policy, early childhood care and education, preschool, culture, linguistic diversity, local funds of knowledge, language of instruction

## Introduction

First steps towards a system of public and private early childhood care and development (ECCD) programs in Bhutan are poised to

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provide a boost to young children taking their first steps towards structured learning and social engagement outside their homes. Preschool and lower primary education that is child-oriented and parent-involving is a new approach for teachers in Bhutan that goes hand in hand with the country's shift to democracy in 2008. Other social changes, including the growth of nuclear family households, urbanization, and recognition of the importance of the early years for securing the country's future with a generation of young people who have been supported from birth to achieve their full potential through education, have also given impetus to increased role of out-of-home early learning and child development programs.

As with every new initiative in Bhutan, proposed expansion of early childhood provisions must be considered from the point of view of the government's efforts to preserve traditional values. These include an emphasis on culturally-based practices that protect and promote the central role of the family in child rearing, which is one of the four pillars of Bhutan's unique Gross National Happiness Policy.

This article describes the emerging ECCD sector in Bhutan, and the influence of the country's Gross National Happiness Policy upon decision-making about sustainable development of programs for young children. This article is based on a recent national scoping study of ECCD in Bhutan led by the authors and carried out with the participation of key partners in Bhutan involved in an emerging ECCD sector. The study confirmed the need for a *made in Bhutan* approach to professional development for ECCD practitioners and to the design of ECCD programs, in order to support the cultural and linguistically diverse population of young children and their families. However, the practical details of how this training and program delivery will be done have yet to be formulated. To date, the Ministry of Education has a draft policy governing ECCD, which has

yet to be endorsed by the government. Drawing upon the example of Bhutan, where approaches to early childhood programs are only now being conceptualized and delivered on a pilot basis, this article highlights the potential for national, value-driven policies and associated project review processes to inspire and guide the development of professional education courses and programs in order to sustain and protect the country's rich environmental, cultural and linguistic resources.

## Context

### Demographics

The Kingdom of Bhutan is a land-locked, wholly mountainous country tucked into the Eastern Himalayan Mountains. According to the government National Statistics Bureau, based on the population and housing census of 2005, the projected population for 2014 is 741,822 people (Royal Government of Bhutan, 2007). Until very recently, Bhutan was one of the most isolated countries in the world, with a ban on internet and television until 1999 and limitations on foreign tourism. Historically Bhutan's closest links have been with Tibet in terms of trade, culture, language, and religion. The country has now turned more toward India for trade, and there is an influx of immigrants and migrant workers, as well cultural, economic and material influences from South Asia. Bhutan was never colonized by Britain, but after it lost the Duar War in 1865, Bhutan was forced to sign a treaty giving British India control of its foreign relations until 2007.<sup>1</sup> These relations resulted in considerable British and British Indian influence. For example, when public school was introduced in the 1960s,<sup>2</sup> the education system was modeled on the British system, and English was introduced as one of two languages of instruction (along with Dzongkha).

### Cultural Diversity

There is a general understanding within Bhutan that the country is fairly homogeneous in terms

of culture. This is an intriguing perception given that the population is demographically very diverse in terms of ethnicity, religion, and language.

Buddhism is the state religion. Buddhist texts, written in 'Ucen<sup>3</sup>, are sacred. Reportedly, approximately two-thirds of the population practice Drukpa Kagyupa or Nyingmapa Buddhism, both of which are disciplines of Mahayana Buddhism. The remainder is mostly Lhotshampa<sup>4</sup> and practice Hinduism. Bon, the country's animist and shamanistic belief system revolves around the worship of nature and is rarely practiced exclusively, but permeates many people's belief systems and daily practices.

The nation has a strong sense of identity that has flourished due in part to its high altitude, landlocked isolation, and, historically, fears of invasion by Tibet and colonization by Britain. There is a common need to create livelihood and provide mutual support in a uniformly rugged and harsh mountainous environment where most people live in small isolated villages, often with no road access. Inter-ethnic marriage is common, and many families have family members who speak different languages and dialects, and perhaps the national language Dzongkha. Communities typically have members who are from different ethnic groups. The country is also strongly unified by its support for the national philosophy of Gross National Happiness and by its adoration of the monarchy.

### **Linguistic Diversity**

There is no majority language in Bhutan. Dzongkha was declared the national language of Bhutan in 1961, and one of the criteria for naturalization is that a person can speak and write Dzongkha (Royal Government of Bhutan, 1969). It is estimated that there are between 19 and 24 languages of Bhutan (van Driem, 2007). All are members of the Tibeto-Burman language family, except for Nepali (Lhotshampka), which is Indo-Aryan, and English (van Driem, 2007).

According to a study by van Driem commissioned by the Royal Government of Bhutan (1993), in the early 1990s the most frequent home languages of the population were: Dzongkha (24.5%), spoken mainly in the 8 western districts of Bhutan; Lhotshampka (24%), spoken mainly in southern Bhutan, Tshangla (21.2%), spoken mainly in eastern Bhutan, and Bumthapkha, Khengkah, and Kurtop languages (12.3%), spoken mainly in central Bhutan. An independent survey by SIL International (2006) suggests recent shifts in the distribution of home languages including: Lhotshampka (35.7%), Dzongkha (21.5%), Tshangla (18.6%), and Bumthapkha, Khengkha, and Kurtop languages (10.8%). Reasons for Dzongkha being declared the national language even though it is spoken by a fraction of the population are historical and pragmatic: Dzongkha was the language of people who held political and religious power when the state was founded and, unlike other Indigenous languages in Bhutan, it has a writing system.

The primary medium of instruction in primary schools is English, but all children are expected to learn to speak, read and write Dzongkha. As a result of the language-in-education policy, many people in Bhutan are bilingual or multilingual at a conversational level, as they are immersed in a variety of languages and dialects from a young age. As well, due to inter-ethnic marriage, many families have diverse language speakers within the extended family and the hamlet in which they reside, including parents and grandparents who speak different languages with their children.

### **Gross National Happiness Policy<sup>5</sup>**

Bhutan gained international attention in 1974 when the fourth King, Jigme Singye Wangchuk, in his coronation address declared that Gross National Happiness (GNH) (*gyalyonggakidpelzom*) was more important than Gross Domestic Product as a measure of the nation's well-being. The Kingdom gained even more attention for

including this unique philosophy in the Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan: Article 9, Principle of State Policy, section 2 states: “the State shall strive to promote those conditions that will enable the pursuit of Gross National Happiness.” GNH holds that happiness is the ultimate purpose of human progress and development. While the policy asserts that each person must cultivate happiness within themselves, the Royal Government of Bhutan sees its role as creating conditions that will enable individuals to achieve happiness.

Overwhelmingly, the government and the people of Bhutan are united by an intense valuing of their pursuit of happiness. A meta-analytic study of over 100 studies of happiness around the world, encompassing 80,000 participants, found that the population of Bhutan is the happiest country in Asia, and the eighth happiest in the world, despite widespread poverty and illiteracy (White, 2006). The survey pointed to the landlocked Himalayan kingdom’s beautiful mountain scenery, isolated culture and strong sense of national identity as reasons for the contentment of its citizens. By comparison, its neighbour, India, ranked 125<sup>th</sup>. The United States ranked 23<sup>rd</sup> and Canada ranked 10<sup>th</sup>.

According to the Centre for Bhutan Studies in Bhutan (n.d.), the emphasis on happiness as a foundation for social policy is deeply rooted in Bhutanese history. Bhutan was unified and fortified in 1637, and a social contract, declared in Bhutan in 1675 stated that the happiness of all sentient beings and the teachings of the Buddha are mutually dependent and that laws must advance the happiness of all sentient beings. The legal code of 1729 further required that laws must promote the happiness of all sentient beings (Thinley, 2005). The current King has stated that “GNH is more important than GNP and is the guide for state’s primary role in society.”

The GNH policy is structured by four pillars, including: (1) Sustainable and equitable development; (2): Environmental conservation;

(3) Cultural promotion; and (4) Good governance. GNH policy includes nine domains: Psychological well-being; Standard of living; Good governance; Health; Education; Community vitality; Cultural diversity and resilience; Time use; and Ecological diversity. These domains are elaborated in terms of 72 measurable GNH Indicators (Gross National Happiness Commission, 2008).

The GNH policy is very much a centre-piece of deliberations from community-level management committees, to district-level planning and priorities, to national policy decision-making, strategic planning, and investments. A GNH Commission uses various screening tools to deliberate about proposed reforms or new projects in every sector (Gross National Happiness Commission, 2008). The GNH Commission has oversight of the education sector, and has recently engaged in a series of reviews of proposed developments of the early childhood care and development sector.

## **Education in Bhutan**

Education is referred to as the Noble Sector in Bhutan and has always been a state responsibility, with the royal government providing all the services and resources from pre-primary (kindergarten) through 12 years of formal schooling (after which scholarship is provided on merit up to the university level). The country has its own national curriculum from kindergarten through class 12. With increased enrolment and schools, the system is hard-pressed to ensure quality in the provision of education services. For this reason, in 2010 the Ministry of Education launched a massive nation-wide education reform initiative called Educating for Gross National Happiness, to be realized through building Green Schools for Green Bhutan: “The initiative is expected to restore much-needed integrity and honour to the education system while at the same time helping internalize and advance the country’s unique

vision of *gyalyonggakidpelzom*" (Ministry of Education, p. 1).

### **Monastic Education System**

Monastic education is the oldest system of education in Bhutan and plays a very important role in Bhutanese society. Compared to monastic education, the system of modern, secular education, governed by the Ministry of Education, has experienced more prominence since it was introduced in the 1960's as part of the country's plan for socioeconomic development. Monastic education is administered by the Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs and looked after by a Central Monastic Body (*Zhung Dratshang*). In 2013, there were 388 monastic education institutions with 12,389 novices (Ministry of Education, 2013). There is no stringent admission age for children to enter monastic schools and some are admitted as young as five years of age. The language of instruction in the monastic institutions is *Choeked*<sup>6</sup> (Sanskrit) and Dzongkha. Recently, basic English, mathematics and information technology are taught in monastic schools. Similar to the modern education system, monastic schools (*Lobdra*) are organized into primary, middle and higher secondary, each divided into grades with different subjects according to grade level and examinations at the end of each grade (Dargye, n.d.; Dorji, 1991). There are also monastic colleges (*Shedra*).

### **Modern Education System**

Children enter the formal school system at six years of age, when they commence *pre-primary*, which is somewhat akin to kindergarten. According to the Gross National Happiness Commission (2013), nearly all (98.5%) of children enroll in primary school; 78% complete Grade 6, and 60% complete Grade 10. The youth literacy rate (15-24 years) is 86%, while the adult literacy rate (15 years and older) is 55%. The Ministry of Education is promoting the

introduction of ECCD to provide youngsters with a transition to formal school and to promote school readiness.

The official language, Dzongkha, and English, are the languages of instruction in pre-primary and primary 1, with English being the medium of instruction for the rest of formal schooling. The majority of curricula and text materials are written and taught in English, while Dzongkha is a subject of study, with the exception that environmental studies is taught in Dzongkha in the first three primary grades. According to an eminent scholar in education (Namgyel, 2014), English has been the main language of instruction since the beginning of modern education in Bhutan in the 1960s, to suit the country's aspirations for socio-economic development and international business. Transitioning from home languages to Dzongkha and English poses a significant challenge for children who have different home languages, and many students perform poorly in academic studies because of their inability to cope with a language of instruction that they have difficulty mastering. Home dialects and languages may be used by teachers initially to help children decipher text material provided in Dzongkha and English, but children are expected to transition to the official languages quickly. Many primary and secondary schools have a language policy requiring students to converse only in Dzongkha and English during school hours.

The unique cultural traditions and philosophy of Bhutan are very evident in school settings, activities, and forms of interaction. For example, every school day begins with a whole-school assembly up to 30 minutes long, during which children stand to sing the national anthem and to recite and listen to prayers led by the school principal. Children learn about local flora and fauna and how to take care of the environment. Every school has a garden tended by children and often by parent volunteers as well. Children bring country foods from home in

traditional containers and sit in small groups to share lunches and conversation; many children are joined during lunch by parents or grandparents. The concept of being a *green* school and living *sustainably* is taught and often reinforced with slogans and sayings painted on exterior walls. Children wear uniforms designed in the traditional Bhutanese styles for males and females. Most children with disabilities remain with their families and are welcomed at school if they can get there. Most communities do not provide transportation for school (many children walk to school on paths through fields and forests). Children with significant sensory, physical or mental impairments are taught in special schools for some time before transitioning to mainstream classrooms in their hometowns and villages.

### **Rapid Social Change**

Bhutan is undergoing rapid social change: it is one of the newest democracies in the world; it is rapidly urbanizing with an anticipated quadrupling of the urban population over the next decade, along with the associated increase in urban poor. Until very recently, nearly all children lived a pastoral existence with their extended families in rural and remote settings where they had been steeped in Buddhist religion, Indigenous knowledge about how to live on the land, and the culture and language of their particular ethnic group. Many families are shifting from extended family units and collective farming to nuclear families, and to work beyond the village, which involves moving or commuting to towns and the capital city of Thimphu. Traditional lifestyles and associated early socialization experiences are radically changing, as the country opens up to globalizing influences through widespread access to the internet, increased exposure to foreign tourists, and expanded trade relations with India and other technologically advanced countries. As well, there is steady growth in women's participation in the workforce beyond the home

and farms, resulting in a need for alternative child care provisions. One exception to these national trends is the very small population of children of yak herders who live with their extended families as nomads.

Along with the overall growth of nuclear family households and urbanization, there is growing recognition of the importance of the early years for securing the country's future with a generation of young people who have been supported from birth with health care, early stimulation, and preschool education to achieve their full potential. These shifts have pointed to the potential for an increased role of out-of-home early learning and child development programs.

## **Inception of ECCD**

### **ECCD Policy**

Under the 11<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan for the country (2014-2018), the Ministry of Education established a national education policy which also includes a policy on ECCD. The national education policy passed the Gross National Happiness Commission's policy screening test and is awaiting the Cabinet's approval. As with every new initiative in Bhutan, proposed expansion of early childhood provisions must be considered from the point of view of the government's efforts to preserve traditional values and must also be congruent with GNH values and principles. These include an emphasis on culturally based practices that protect and promote the central role of the family in child rearing, which is one of the four pillars of Bhutan's unique Gross National Happiness Policy. The goal of protecting and sustaining the central roles of local cultural teaching and learning and family-based care for children may appear to be incongruent with the concept of out-of-home care for young children. Like many countries around the world, in Bhutan, the government and families face difficult choices arising from the movement of many families away from extended family

homesteads and into towns and cities, and an increase in dual-earner families. These social changes have increased the acceptability of out-of-home care as an alternative to traditional childhoods.

The ECCD policy supports a four-pronged strategy to: (1) promote sound parenting and child care practices for young children through home and family based interventions using the mass media and non-formal education centres; (2) promote early stimulation of infants and toddlers through health care centres; (3) promote and support early childhood care and development centres (i.e., preschools) run by the private sector, civil society organizations, corporate bodies, and the Ministry of Education with assistance from UNICEF and Save the Children, in order to enhance early learning opportunities for children aged 3 to 5 years, and (4) support interventions in schools to improve teaching and learning practices, particularly in the first two years of primary school, to help children aged 6 to 8 years to maintain and increase gains made through ECCD programs and services, and also to enhance the readiness of schools for young children (Choden, 2013).

Under the government's 10<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan (2009-2013), the Ministry of Education established an ECCD unit within its Department of School Education as a nodal agency for all matters related to ECCD, with the mandate to plan, coordinate, and implement ECCD plans and programs. This unit has established ECCD

program guidelines, created advocacy materials and resource packages to support ECCD implementation. As well, in 2010, this unit convened a group of in-country advisors to review, adapt, and ultimately adopt the U.S. based Early Learning and Development Standards (ELDS) with its standard domains, including: language and communication, cognitive/intellectual, approaches toward learning, physical health and motor development, social and emotional development. The Bhutan group added a country-specific domain: moral, spiritual and cultural development. Although the ELDS has not yet been implemented, the Ministry of Education hopes that they will serve as aspirational principles to guide development of the sector, including new professional development courses (Choden, 2013).

### ECCD Programs

The ECCD policy supports the introduction of centre-based ECCD programs. By the end of 2013, 7% of boys and girls in Bhutan were enrolled in an ECCD program (Gross National Happiness Commission, 2013). Nearly all children's first exposure to group settings for learning occurs when they enter formal schooling at six years of age. The government's 11<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan has set 10% access to preschool as a target for 2014-2018. The quantity and categories of current programs are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Centre-based Preschools in Bhutan in 2013

Type of ECCD	No				Teachers		
		Boys	Girls	Total	Male	Female	Total
Community	82	1064	1024	2088	1	115	116
NGO Funded	27	71	77	148	0	9	9
Workplace	9	126	148	274	0	20	20
Private	47	697	628	1325	11	174	185
Total	165	1958	1877	3835	12	318	330

(Annual Education Statistics 2013, Ministry of Education, Thimphu)

These programs are overseen by the district (*Dzongkhag*) education officers, pre-primary teachers trained in a Step by Step ECCD approach and by three ECCD program officers within the Ministry of Education. As shown, programs include roughly 82 community based preschools in rural settings, nine workplace based ECCD centres, 47 private ECCD centres, and 27 ECCD centres across the country that are run by non-government organizations. To date, none of these programs are regulated, although the physical infrastructure (facilities including building, toilets, outdoor play space) must be licensed by the Ministry of Education. There is no standard curriculum, mandated program components or model, nutrition requirements, or standard set of resources.

Community based (i.e., publically funded) preschool ranges from five to seven hours per day. This is often preceded and followed by a long walk from home and back, typically in small groups accompanied informally by an older sibling, parent, or grandparent from the children's village. Ministry of Education policy stipulates that children's journeys to and from school—including preschool children—do not exceed one hour of walking each way. In community ECCD centres, the government pays for children to attend. In workplace based ECCD centres, the employee pays a nominal fee for children to attend. In NGO centres, the NGO pays for children to attend. In private ECCD, parents pay for children to attend.

### **ECCD Practitioner Training**

As yet, there is no professional development system to produce a cadre of well-qualified ECCD practitioners or leaders. For their 11<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan, the Ministry of Education has set a target of recruiting secondary school (*class 12*) graduates to work as full-time practitioners in ECCD programs with a basic one year certificate in ECCD, followed by a diploma, degree and

graduate degree in ECCD. These are aspirations: there are currently no accredited courses or certificate, diploma or degree programs in ECCD in Bhutan. However, the Royal University of Bhutan has agreed in principle to introduce accredited ECCD programs if funding can be found to develop and deliver them. Currently, UNICEF provides financial and technical support to lecturers at Paro College of Education, which is part of the Royal University of Bhutan, to develop courses for a two-year post-secondary diploma program in ECCD.

Some community-based ECCD practitioners have no training at all (and often have not completed secondary school) and some have participated in short-term (e.g., 10 days) *New ECCD Facilitators Training* and a three to five day *ECCD refresher course* provided by the Ministry of Education and Save the Children. These short courses are generic training packages developed by western ECCD specialists and delivered by the Ministry of Education. There is no culturally specific content and, apart from pointers on how to make local learning materials from local materials, there is no guidance on how to incorporate local funds of knowledge, languages, cultures, family skills or parents' goals for their children's development.

### **Study of the Emerging ECCD Sector**

From 2011–2012, a national study was conducted to assess perceptions of the need and goals for ECCD programs in Bhutan, their desired characteristics, and the associated need for development of professional capacity to design, operate, and monitor ECCD programs. The study was led by the co-authors, along with a study team that included representatives of four partners in the study: the Royal Education Council, the Royal University of Bhutan, the Ministry of Education, and the Ministry of

Health. At the time of the study reported below, conducted from 2011 to 2012, there were about half the number of ECCD programs as there are today as shown in Table 1. To date, this is the only known study of ECCD in Bhutan conducted with Bhutanese partners and scholars. The study was supported by the Open Society Foundation ([www.opensocietyfoundations.org/](http://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/)).

Over 200 individuals were surveyed and/or interviewed for the study. At least one practitioner from every community-based preschool program in the country completed a questionnaire sent to them by mail (most programs have only one practitioner). Ten practitioners from some private preschools also completed the questionnaire. As well, the study team interviewed representatives of government institutions (Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health, National Commission for Women and Children); autonomous institutions (Royal Education Council, Royal Institute of Health Science, Royal University of Bhutan), non-government organizations (Save the Children, UNICEF, Loden Foundation, Tarayana Foundation, Draktsho Vocational Institute, and the Respect Education Nurture and Empower Women Organization), and key individuals including Dzongkhag education officers and village head-men. Focus groups meetings were conducted with over 100 parents and with pre-primary school teachers. The team also engaged over 40 young children in a number of villages in conversations about their wishes and needs in regards to going to preschool. The design and interpretation of the study paid close attention to the country's overarching GNH policy as the *end product* of development, asking interviewees for their views on the importance of the policy and their ideas for implementing the policy in the context of ECCD.

The study found that parents, community level governing bodies and leaders, government and non-government actors, and private nursery

and preschool providers strongly supported expansion of centre-based programs for young children. Their main reasons for supporting this new concept were, respectively: (1) to provide safety and care for children while parents are working; (2) to enable children to learn, especially English and Dzongkha alphabets, before starting formal schooling; and (3) to provide socialization outside the home.

### **A Made-in-Bhutan Approach to Professional Education in ECCD**

The broad study of ECCD confirmed parent and community demand to develop the ECCD sector. The ECCD policy within the National Education Policy requires a professional education system for front-line practitioners to deliver a spectrum of infant, toddler, and preschool programs. Partners in the scoping study agreed that development of a professional system of career-laddered certificate, diploma, degree and graduate courses on early childhood care and development is timely. This will help to ensure the quality of an array of programs and services for young children and their families. Paro College of Education in the Royal University of Bhutan was identified as the best place to start to deliver the professionalization program.

Leaders in the development of the ECCD sector are acutely aware of the value and need to bring local funds of knowledge into early learning curricula, and to preserve and cherish long-held cultural and religious traditions through the early childhood programs. At the conclusion of the study, a *made in Bhutan* approach to post-secondary education in ECCD, conceived by the study team, was resoundingly endorsed by government and university representatives. Conceptually, this bi/multi-cultural approach emphasizes the benefits of incorporating *the best of the west* while

affording a central place for local knowledge, values, and practices in professional training and early childhood programs. The aspirational vision informing this *made in Bhutan* approach is one of children continuing to develop their strong identification with and knowledge about the land, their families' religion, cultural traditions, and forms of social interaction, while also benefiting from some formal instruction and opportunities for socialization beyond their home and village.

Support for a *made-in-Bhutan* approach suggests that Bhutanese leaders in education and community development are exercising caution about importing fully elaborated, prescriptive, brand name pedagogical approaches, early learning curricula and resources in order to ensure that the country can sustain its long-held cultural traditions and Indigenous knowledge, and support children's

pride in who they are as Bhutanese citizens. Bhutanese scholar Pedey (2013) warned that in the absence of capacity for ECCD in Bhutan, the government and private practitioners rely on external consultants who know little about the cultures and languages. The attendant risk of importing western approaches to the exclusion of local goals for children and local funds of knowledge is very high. A balance must be reached, as the *made in Bhutan* approach identified in the study reported here underscored.

### **Incorporating GNH into ECCD**

Leaders in developing the ECCD sector in Bhutan have pointed to GNH as a national philosophy that could provide direction for development of the sector (Choden, 2013; Pedey, 2013).

Pillar 1: Sustainable and equitable development: Economic development for all Bhutanese
▪ Learn about fairness
▪ Want only what we need
Pillar 2: Environmental conservation: care for nature and others
▪ Appreciate the importance of the environment
▪ Do not use non-degradable items
Pillar 3: Cultural Promotion: Preserve wisdom of an ancient culture
▪ Respect parents, extended family, neighbours
▪ Labour for the good of all: classroom, playground and toilet cleaning and beautification
• Incorporate Bhutanese folk tales and stories
Pillar 4: Good governance: good citizenship
▪ Resolve conflicts peacefully
▪ Do everything in a democratic way
▪ Be honest

## Discussion

This section explores the potential for congruence of the current approach to ECCD with the GNH policy in Bhutan.

School readiness was the most recurring objective of ECCD identified by participants in the study reported here. Similarly, documents and discussions by the Ministry of Education identify school readiness as the main aim of ECCD, underscoring the potential of ECCD to contribute to the country's pursuit of the Millennium Development Goals and Education for All. The GNH policy, especially Pillar 3, enshrines the importance of preserving the wisdom of an ancient culture, including the central role of the family in caring for children.

When families shift from extended to nuclear units, and when women's traditional roles as primary caregivers shift to roles in the labour force outside the home--as they are all over the world-- various non-traditional arrangements to care for young children must be found. To promote a country's economic development objectives, citizens often expect that public funds should be directed towards supporting alternative child care arrangements. This situation does not necessarily call for centre-based care or early learning programs such as preschool or kindergarten. Preschool is not child minding. There is a significant difference between child care programs, which is an approach to providing group care for children when family members are not available, and preschool or kindergarten, which are generally oriented towards promoting optimal child development and learning.

In many countries, the state seems all too willing to take over the family's role in caring for children through various forms of institutional based care, including centre-based infant care and preschool programs. When there are high numbers of children who do not enroll in school or who fail early grades, governments often respond to a push from international organizations to establish early learning

programs for children who have traditionally learned at the hearth and side by side with adults in their agrarian villages. Yet research shows that centre-based programs for young children do not yield cognitive gains and can produce social behaviour problems if the programs are not of high quality (Peisner-Feinberg & Burchinal, 1997). Moreover, centre-based programs can erode the responsibility of extended family members and villages to care for children (Swadener et al., 2000). As well, some countries have found that provision of preschool as a form of child care does not always result in increased maternal participation in the labour force (Cascio & Schanzenbach, 2013; Fitzpatrick, 2010). This outcome was suggested during the national study in Bhutan, where mothers, and sometimes fathers, were often seen at community-based preschools waiting for their children all day--perhaps because of the hour long walk each way to drop off and pick up their children.

At the present time, Bhutan has chosen to explore centre-based preschool programs with explicit early learning objectives that appear to focus on learning the rudiments of Dzongkha and English. As noted, there is little to no training for preschool facilitators, and facilities are often extremely basic. The centres provide new opportunities for children to socialize with other youngsters beyond their home villages, but preschool facilitators lack training, mentorship and supervision to ensure that children's social interactions are constructive. As well, there is often only one facilitator for a group of up to 20 children. (In large classes with two co-facilitators, there are no arrangements for substitutes if one is unable to come to work). Although strongly discouraged by the ECCD unit in the Ministry of Education, the use of traditional ways of disciplining a child, including corporal punishment is acknowledged, particularly when the ECCD facilitator has not received practitioner training. Without training, a holistic curriculum that reflects elements of the

GHN philosophy, or quality assurance, it is reasonable to ask whether the emerging ECCD sector would do better to support (at least on a pilot basis in a mixed-model approach) a village-level, family daycare model, where one caregiver or family within a village is supported with training, mentorship, supervision and remuneration to care for village children in their home or a nearby facility. Family based daycare would seem to be more congruent with the GNH policy, with its emphasis on the family's role in caring for children and maintenance of cultural traditions, and could also provide longer hours to cover the time that dual career parents are at work or in the fields.

The choice of centre-based preschool in Bhutan seems to be driven by the perceived need to introduce children early to the rudiments of the two languages of instruction they will be required to master when they transition to formal schooling. What are the potential subtractive effects of early learning programs in Bhutan?

### **Home Language Proficiency**

The National Education Policy in Bhutan does not comment on the language of instruction to be used in ECCD. According to the Chief Program Office for ECCD in the Ministry of Education in Bhutan (Gyeltshen, 2014), ECCD practitioners are encouraged to use children's home languages and not to restrict their interactions to English and Dzongkha. The reality, however, is that one of the main activities in centre-based ECCD in Bhutan is rote recitation of the letters and sounds of English and Dzongkha.

A majority of participants in the study emphasized the value of centre-based preschool experience for facilitating children's acquisition of Dzongkha and English so that children do not lose their first three years of primary school struggling—and often failing—to learn English and Dzongka. Virtually no one identified support for ethno-minority linguistic proficiency.

Reasons given for this emphasis were that: (1) children's transition for formal schooling will be facilitated by becoming familiar with the two languages used in Primary 1; and (2) it is widely understood that there are no orthographies for other languages spoken in the country. Demand for preschool in the majority language of instruction in formal school is also extremely common among parents and educators around the world. In Bhutan, the effort to promote *school readiness* in both private and community-based preschools visited by the study team largely consisted of children's engagement in teacher-led rote recitation and copying of the letters and sounds of the Dzongkha and English alphabets and numbers with few instances of learning through play.

Lack of support in ECCD for facilitating children's proficiency with their home language is increasingly common in preschools around the world and a potent source of language loss around the world, with the attendant loss of cultural knowledge and diversity. This lack of support reflects parent demand, teacher recruitment and training practices, and international pressure to measure children's learning in early grades using standardized early learning measurement tools, such as Early Grade Reading Assessment, that do not take into account uneven learning trajectories when children are gaining proficiency in two or more languages. This is especially so in settings where there is no option to participate in formal schooling that offers instruction in the home language, so that supporting acquisition of the majority language of instruction is part of becoming *school ready*.

The rapidly changing situation in Bhutan brings to the fore some of the possible trade-offs in a country that aims to use early childhood programs as a vehicle to improve readiness for a modernized school system. The main trade-off that appears to be imminent in Bhutan is children's opportunity to become fully proficient in their home language and, potentially, a

second language that is the lingua franca of their geographic region, and to use this language in their formal learning journeys.

A large research literature has shown that children's first language is the optimal language for literacy and learning throughout primary school (UNESCO, 2008a). Indeed, some educators argue that only those countries where the learner's first language is the language of instruction are likely to achieve the goals of Education for All. UNESCO has encouraged home language instruction in primary education since 1953 (UNESCO, 1953). In its report, *Strong Foundations: Early Childhood Care and Education*, UNESCO (2007) highlights the advantages of MLE right from the start. For example: children are more likely to enroll and succeed in school (Kosonen, 2005); parents are more likely to communicate with teachers and participate in their children's learning (Benson, 2002); girls and rural children with less exposure to a dominant language stay in school longer and repeat grades less often (Hovens, 2002; UNESCO Bangkok, 2005); and children in MLE tend to develop certain types of cognitive flexibility and metalinguistic awareness earlier and better than their monolingual peers (e.g., Bialystok, 2001; Cummins, 2000; King & Mackey, 2007).

Yet, Bhutan is one of many countries around the world that insist on exclusive use of one or two privileged languages, while excluding other languages (Arnold, Bartlett, Gowani, & Merali, 2006). A common understanding in Bhutan, attested to by the findings of the study reported earlier, is that parents demand ECCD programs that have as a primary goal teaching their children English and Dzongkha to *save them* from early school difficulties and failure. This parent demand is understandable, given the language challenges that children will face upon school entry. However, whether parents would demand English and Dzongkha acquisition as ECCD goals if formal schooling offered home language based multilingual education (MTB-

MLE) is a moot question. In many countries, when MTB-MLE is offered for formal schooling, parent demand for ECCD programs to focus on acquisition of dominant languages sometimes shifts to demand for ECCD programs to play a role in maintaining and developing children's proficiency in their home language (Ball & McIvor, 2013). This seems a likely scenario in many parts of Bhutan, where cultural continuity and happiness with who one is and what one has are superordinate values.

It is not hard to grasp all that may be at stake for ethno-linguistic minority children in Bhutan and for the nation as a whole from neglect of ethno-linguistic diversity in the context of formal learning. Outcomes may range from children developing low self-efficacy as learners when faced with the need to learn English and Dzongkha as soon as they enter school, not being able to succeed in learning tasks, teachers feeling overwhelmed by children's inability to participate, early experiences of school failure, not becoming fully literate because of struggles to master two new written languages, and so on. For those children who do succeed, perhaps through a language transition program that helps them to acquire Dzongkha and English, there is still the risk of subtractive effects of schooling whereby children fail to become linguistically competent members of their local communities and lose the ability to access their cultural heritage. While some children may continue to develop proficiency in their first language while succeeding in school in English, this does not happen automatically. In other countries where outcome research is available, studies show that many children who speak non-dominant languages and dialects do not become fully proficient in their home languages, resulting in an inability to communicate about more than mundane matters with parents and grandparents. In other countries where this situation exists, there is rapid depletion of the nation's repository of languages and dialects and the cultural

knowledge that is carried through them. In Bhutan, avoiding this kind of cultural loss is the stated purpose of the GNH policy and implementing Commission.

There is a growing literature describing circumstances, resources and models that are working around the world to successfully support learning of ethno-linguistic minority children through home language based, multilingual education (MTB-MLE) (e.g., Benson & Kosonen, 2013; Yiakoumetti, 2012). This literature is beginning to answer questions such as:

- Under what circumstances and with what resources can MTB-MLE be an effective, additive approach whereby children become proficient in their home language while laying the foundation for learning in additional languages?
- What are the costs and benefits of alternative approaches in varying situations and at different levels, from the individual, the family, community, school, region, and nation?
- What are meaningful yet efficient ways to measure costs and benefits? What are the implications of MTB-MLE for recruiting, educating, and mentoring teachers and teacher assistants and for creating and evaluating curricula in diverse language classrooms?
- What are the contributions of family and community in formal and non-formal MTB-MLE, and how can these be measured?

Investment in a coordinated program of research could advance knowledge about such questions in order to inform national language in education policies, teacher training, and local approaches to language of instruction in formal and non-formal education.

A coordinated program of research in Bhutan could advance knowledge about these kinds of questions in order to inform national language in education policies, teacher training, and local approaches to language in education in formal school and in ECCD programs. Research is also needed on steps that can be taken in

ECCD programs and during the transition to school to prepare children meaningfully for the mix of language(s) they will need to acquire for success in primary school.

Given the important role of family members as children's primary caregivers and first teachers in Bhutan, leaders in ECCD could explore how to involve community members with diverse language skills in ECCD programs and in primary schools. There is a need to develop and evaluate strategies for training ECCD facilitators and lower primary teachers to be effective in MTB-MLE classrooms.

In many countries, education authorities raise objections to allowing education to encompass non-dominant languages, with similar arguments used to justify restrictive language in education policies. The most common argument in Bhutan is that there are no writing systems to support the development of literacy in any languages in Bhutan besides Dzongkha and English. However, two of the languages, Lepcha and Nepali, are written languages with literacy traditions in other countries. As well, there is the potential to develop orthographies for Bhutan's other, unwritten languages. A small indication of this potential was gleaned by the authors when they engaged a group of teenagers who were using their phones to text in Tshangla (Sharcho) -- one of the languages, spoken by between 18.6% and 21.2% of the population, especially in the eastern region, that is purported not to have orthography. While phone texting hardly approximates the development of orthography, this encounter hints at the potential for an unwritten language to become a medium of text-based communication. Elsewhere in the world, steps are being taken to create orthographies for oral languages in order to ensure their survival and so they can become languages of learning in formal education.

The Tibeto-Burman languages of Bhutan were not documented until recently, with the exception of Dzongkha, which has a native

literacy tradition in Bhutan. The government of Bhutan is now advocating for the creation of Tibetan--or Dzongkha--or Tibetan-like (*Ucen*) orthographies for its endangered languages (Hyslop, 2011). Many of Bhutan's languages are endangered including: 300 Brokkat speakers, 5000 Brokpa speakers, 1100 Layakha speakers, 1000 Khampa Tibetan speakers, 1000 Dakpa speakers, 1000 Chali speakers, 1000 'Olekha speakers, and 1000 Gongduk speakers – to name a few that are in the endangered range (SIL International, 2006).

Around the world, along with increasing recognition of language endangerment and of the cultural knowledge and identity that is lost when a language dies, there is increased interest and investment in creating orthographies for unwritten language endangerment (Cahill & Rice, 2014). For example SIL international holds annual symposia on this topic, and has numerous projects to assist minority language groups to develop written versions of their languages and to deliver education in these languages (Malone, 2004) Literacy in an endangered language can strengthen a language's vitality, raise the perceived status of the language, make it possible to communicate in new ways, preserve cultural knowledge, and make it easier to disseminate certain types of information, such as health information, agricultural innovations, and education.

Language documentation methodologies have improved, and are aided by new technologies. This can be a complex undertaking and requires specific technical expertise on linguistic and non-linguistic factors that need to be considered in order to represent an oral language (Adams, 2014). However, it can be done and is especially urgent in the face of imminent language loss in almost every country in the world, including Bhutan. An example of this is the work of Hyslop (2014), who worked with the Dzongkha Development Commission in Bhutan to develop a preliminary Roman and Ucen-based orthography for Kurtop

– one of Bhutan's endangered languages. Investment in the process of developing orthographies for at least the languages in Bhutan that are spoken widely, such as Tshangla (unwritten lingua franca of eastern Bhutan) would be congruent with the GNH policy, especially Pillar 3, which promotes preservation of the wisdom of ancient cultures. Languages are the vehicles for expressing and preserving cultural knowledges. This is *intangible cultural heritage*--traditional and Indigenous knowledge, beliefs, and practices that are time-tested, forged through the experiences of generations and expressed with often-unique concepts and expressions of a common tongue. Respect for multiple languages broadens the base of knowledge from which everyone can draw, contributing to a global knowledge repository.

Some governments regard home languages as subversive to national unity. Indeed, national unity is reportedly one of the motivations for establishing Dzongkha as the national language (Van Driem). However, this outlook is contradicted by studies that show that non-dominant groups whose languages and cultures are respected rather than repressed will be more loyal to the state. As UNESCO Director General Irina Bokova underscores: "Recognizing local languages enables more people to make their voices heard and take an active part in their collective fate. The protection and promotion of home languages are keys to global citizenship and authentic mutual understanding."

Many linguists, educators, and world leaders agree that perhaps the greatest threat to home languages is posed by education systems that refuse to use them as languages of instruction or even as subjects of study. In the context of Bhutan, where there are nineteen distinct languages, promoting children's acquisition of their home language, Dzongkha and English through formal education would help to ensure a sense of social inclusion and ethnic pride, sustainability of local knowledge, and communication within the country and on

the global stage. Other countries in the region, including Thailand, Cambodia, and the Philippines, have new national language policies that support processes to recruit and train home language teachers and to develop home language textbooks and other learning materials, including sometimes creating an alphabet. One step that is being implemented in Bhutan is to ensure that ECCD practitioners and teachers who speak a particular language are assigned to teach in the communities that also speak that language.

### **Inclusion of Multiple Cultures and Languages**

Bhutan has many rich cultures to draw upon and strong commitment to respect for all sentient beings and the connections among beings in the natural world and in families and communities. This recognition of interdependence, enshrined in the GNH policy, encompasses values and beliefs that are pertinent to the well-being of young children, their families, and communities. While policy based on a *holistic* approach has been a pervasive term in ECCD and in education in general, the mutual interdependence that is reinforced throughout the pillars, domains, and values of Bhutan's GNH policy provides a depth and breadth of understanding and scope that could be highly instrumental if it was applied to the design, delivery and monitoring of ECCD and professional development programs. This can also help to guard against an over-enthusiastic reach for models and curricula from outside the country, as so often happens when a country identifies resource gaps that it quickly wants to fill. One step to make ECCD curriculum consistent with GNH philosophy is to revive the age-old tradition of story-telling and to incorporate folk tales and local literature. With globalization and the advent of television, Hindi and English cartoon characters have become very popular with Bhutanese children. Reviving and strengthening the status of cultural

folk heroes and stories (e.g., *Ap Wang Drugay*, *Meme Heyley Heyley* and others) could be pursued through the development of children's books, cartoon serials, and other learning resources. Using the GNH policy to guide and enable development of the ECCD sector will ensure that cultural traditions and epistemological knowledge residing within Bhutan's multi-ethnic, multi-lingual communities is explicitly considered and incorporated in the evolution of policy and in ECCD teaching and learning.

### **Conclusion**

This article highlights what might be sustained and what might be sacrificed through the introduction of centre-based ECCD programs as this formerly isolated Himalayan Kingdom opens up to hegemonic and homogenizing forces of globalization. The foregoing description of the emergence of an ECCD sector in Bhutan points to the role that national aspirations, embodied in a superordinate, visionary policy like GNH, could play in promoting social inclusion, language maintenance, and preservation of culturally-based wisdom. As Bhutanese scholar Pedey (2013) states: "The goal of the Bhutanese education system is to prepare children to be GNH graduates. This goal requires foundations to be laid from the early childhood period." Providing scope for multiple languages of instruction, including Dzongkha, English and students' home languages, right from the start in ECCD, can enrich and empower the next generation to uphold the pillars of GNH while becoming global citizens, leading to a more sustainable future.

### **Notes**

1. The treaty was revised in 1920 and 1949, and concluded in 2007.
2. Until the 1960s, the only formal education available in Bhutan except for a handful of private schools was through Buddhist monasteries.

3. 'Ucen is the Tibetan-based orthography derived from Brahmi in the 7<sup>th</sup> century C.E.
4. Formerly people from Nepal who settled in Bhutan before 1950.
5. For information on GNH visit:  
<http://www.gnhc.gov.bt/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/GNH-FAQs-pdf.pdf>; <http://www.gnhc.gov.bt/>;  
<http://www.bhutanstudies.org.bt/>
6. The liturgical, religio-philosophical, *language of the Dharma*.

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