CONDITIONS OF HAPPINESS:
AN EVALUATION OF BHUTAN’S INITIATIVE TO EDUCATE FOR
GROSS NATIONAL HAPPINESS

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Master of Arts Paper
International Comparative Education
Graduate School of Education
Stanford University
July 2013
INTERNATIONAL COMPARATIVE EDUCATION

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An Evaluation of Bhutan’s Initiative to Educate for Gross National Happiness

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July 2013

A Master of Arts Paper in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

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Acknowledgements

It is with immense gratitude that I thank my advisor Eamonn Callan for understanding my intentions and interests even when I could not express myself clearly, for always providing me with illuminating insights, and for being a constant source of guidance.

I am particularly thankful to my program director Christine Min Wotipka without whose invaluable support and guidance I could not have completed this monograph. I am also very thankful to my TA Magda Gross for always being encouraging in every possible way.

Special thanks to peer reviewers and editors of my earlier drafts, Jess Lee, Michelle Mills, Timothy Sullivan, Margaret Irving, and summer workshop members Tiffany Tsai, Ryan Brown, Qiao Wen, and Huisi Li. I also thank Matt Schuelka, who provided me with very helpful comments on my draft.

I am deeply indebted to the participants of my study, who took the time and effort to share their experiences and thoughts with me.

I feel very honored to share this incredible experience with all the wonderful people in my program cohort. I am thankful to each and every one of them, especially the EV zombies for keeping me sane throughout this process.

I also owe my gratitude to Mark Mancall and his family - Aue Tashi, Aue Dechen, and their wonderful sons. I could not have survived this program without their kindness and support. Thank you for being my family in California. Additionally, I am extremely grateful to Mark Mancall for always encouraging me to have courage and to take action. This monograph is my first step and I hope someday I will make you proud.

A big special thank you to my sisters Karma Tshomo and Choki Tshomo for always being there for me. Ashim Karma- your amazing ability to make us feel loved and supported even when you are thousands of miles away is incredible. Ashim Choki- you are a blessing to all of us and I cannot even begin to explain how lucky I am to have you in my life.

Lastly, and most importantly, I wish to thank my parents Sangay Wangdi and Mindu for always believing in me, for showing me how to live a meaningful life, and for representing everything that is good in this world. It is believed that the Buddha once said, “The debt of gratitude we owe our parents is as wide as the sky and as deep as the sea.” While I will never be able to express the extent of my gratitude to my parents for everything that they are to me, I dedicate this monograph to them as a small gesture.

Thank You!
Abstract

Bhutan is the only country in the world to recognize Gross National Happiness (GNH) as its overarching developmental philosophy. The nationwide implementation of the Educating for GNH Initiative (EGNHI) is recognized as one of the most comprehensive attempts to operationalize GNH in schools in Bhutan. The purpose of this study is to examine how the initiative is implemented in order to better understand the concept of educating for GNH and its implications for teachers and students. Qualitative analyses of government documents and teacher responses to an open-ended questionnaire collected via email reveals a general disconnect between what is recommended in the documents and the needs of teachers and students in the classrooms. To address this concern, I propose the application of the concept of freedom as expressed in Buddhist philosophy and Amartya Sen’s capability approach theory to the EGNHI. Such an approach may provide a cogent justification for how the purpose and implications of the EGNHI could be enhanced in Bhutan to provide the type of education that would enable all individuals to develop to the best of their capabilities to achieve their well-being and happiness.
What are the conditions necessary for the pursuit of happiness? Who is responsible for these conditions? Many have attempted to answer these questions throughout history. Over two millennia ago, Plato and Aristotle grappled with them philosophically and more recently, economists, educators, and psychologists have started exploring them empirically. But in 2008, one nation-state took the bold step of addressing these questions as a matter of public policy. Bhutan, a small kingdom in the Himalayas, endorsed its first Constitution, declaring the “pursuit of Gross National Happiness” as a national goal, suggesting that the state is responsible for the well-being and happiness of its people.\(^1\) To better understand how the state can accomplish this goal, however, highlights a fundamental challenge for the nation of Bhutan.

Educational settings are recognized as institutions where state ideologies are developed and implemented (Apple 1982). Consistent with this view, Bhutan’s 2012 *State of the Nation Report* distinguishes education as “the glue that binds all the pillars and dimensions of Gross National Happiness and the key to their realization” (RGOB 2013a, 39). In December 2009, Bhutan launched the Educating for GNH Initiative (EGNHI) as an attempt to operationalize its GNH goal. As part of the initiative, by 2013, every school principal and teacher in Bhutan is to receive some assistance from the Ministry of Education on how to educate for GNH (GPI Atlantic 2010; RGoB 2012a). This nationwide implementation of the EGNHI is by far one of the most expansive attempts at the operationalization of GNH in Bhutan. The EGNHI also has direct implications for the lives of approximately 200,000 students in Bhutan, who account for nearly

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\(^1\) Article 9.2 of The Constitution of Bhutan (2008)
25 percent of the Bhutanese population.\textsuperscript{2} Four years into the initiative, to my knowledge, no researchers have examined the implications of the EGNHI.

This study provides a philosophical assessment of the idea of educating for GNH through a qualitative analysis of official government documents and teacher responses to an open-ended questionnaire administered via email. Since a common understanding of how educating for GNH impacts the teaching and learning experiences of teachers and students in Bhutan does not exist, the purpose of this analysis is to examine how the initiative is implemented to better understand the EGNHI and its implications for teachers and students. This will help identify how government policies and teacher practice could be enhanced and improved through the EGNHI. Findings from the analyses reveal a general disconnect between what is recommended in the documents and what teachers and students in the classrooms actually need. To address this, I propose the application of the concept of freedom as interpreted in Buddhist philosophy and economist-philosopher Amartya Sen’s capability approach theory (1999) to the EGNHI to provide a cogent justification for how the purpose and implications of the EGNHI could be enhanced in Bhutan. I argue that any nation-state emphasizing GNH through its educational system needs to provide the conditions necessary for the enhancement of the capabilities and freedom of all students to become the best that they can be, to lead the kind of life they value, to choose a life that leads to happiness.

\textsuperscript{2} Based on Figure 1.2: Total number of students from primary to tertiary level schools in Bhutan (RGoB 2012c, 14). Current population of Bhutan as of June 2013 is 734,963 (NSB 2013) http://www.nsb.gov.bt/main/main.php#&slider1=4
Background and Context

Background: The Emergence and Spread of Gross National Happiness

GNH first emerged as a developmental concept in the 1970s when the Fourth King of Bhutan, Jigme Singye Wangchuck, emphasized that, as a leader of a nation he was more concerned about the happiness of his people than the growth of the nation’s economy. The concept of GNH is built on the idea that Gross Domestic Product (GDP) alone is an insufficient measure of a nation’s development—development should also reflect aspects related to the well-being and happiness of the people. GNH as a developmental concept acknowledges that emotional, social, and spiritual development of the people is just as important to a nation’s development as material aspects of development (i.e., GDP). Since its emergence in the 1970s, GNH has been emphasized as a policy concern in Bhutan leading to its formal endorsement as a constitutional objective in 2008.

In the last two decades, GNH as a developmental concept has gained momentum both on a national and international front. In Bhutan, GNH has grown from an abstract goal to an indicator of national development. Research and surveys have been carried out to develop the GNH index, which would measure peoples’ level of happiness based on the concept of GNH in Bhutan. In order to ensure that GNH is embedded in all of Bhutan’s developmental strategies, plans, and policies, the Planning Commission, which was established in 1971 to independently oversee all developmental strategies, was renamed the Gross National Happiness Commission in 2008. This change in name was a deliberate effort from policy-makers to state that

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3 The focus of this paper is not on how GNH is measured but on how it is being implemented in the education sector and why it is important to understand its implications. For more details about the GNH Index and the GNH survey please refer to the website: http://www.grossnationalhappiness.com/

4 For more details about the Gross National Happiness Commission, please refer to the website: http://www.gnhc.gov.bt/about-us/
developmental strategies of all sectors, including education, should be rooted in the concept of GNH in Bhutan.

Much of the international recognition of GNH was sparked by general interest in the world seeking alternative measures to development. The United Nation’s (UN) endorsement of the Human Development Index (HDI) in 1990 led to worldwide explorations of developmental measures that included social aspects and subjective well-being to economic development. With the introduction of the HDI, economists Mahbub ul Haq and Amartya Sen placed the consideration of basic needs of people at the center of development by emphasizing the inclusion of subjective well-being of people to economic growth as a more holistic measure of development.5

In this light, GNH as a measure of development represented an appealing alternative to traditionally held views on what constitutes development. A decade after the endorsement of HDI, three international conferences on GNH brought it to the forefront of the discussion on alternative measures to development (Noy 2008). More recently, in April 2012, GNH formally entered the world of international development when the UN, upon the recommendation from Bhutan, endorsed happiness as a universal goal. This led to the annual observation of March 20 as International Happiness Day (UN 2012). Coinciding with this recognition, a World Happiness Report (Sachs et al. 2012) was launched at the same conference to reflect the increasing international demand for attention to well-being and happiness of people.

Other countries have started to embrace the emphasis on happiness as a matter of public policy. According to former president of Harvard University Derek Bok (2010), Bhutan may be the only nation to formally adopt happiness as a principal goal, but France, the United Kingdom,

5 For more details about the HDI please visit the website: http://hdr.undp.org/en/humandev/
and Australia, and other countries have started to endorse the concept. Bok suggests that even the United States should consider policies that address the happiness and well-being of its people. According to Bok (2010), the findings that led to the development of the concept of the Easterlin-paradox suggest that well-being and happiness should be a matter of public policy in the US. He argues that even though the US has high economic growth, social problems such as inadequate education, chronic pain, sleep disorders, depression, and divorce persist in the US because policy-makers have overlooked the factors and conditions that contribute to the happiness and well-being of the people.

The concept of happiness as a more accurate measure of development continues to proliferate. However, acknowledgment of this rising interest in happiness and GNH as a matter of public policy in the global arena does not mean that GNH is the answer to the eternal questions surrounding happiness. Instead, this acknowledgement emphasizes the need for deeper analysis of the concept of GNH. For Bhutan, it means a focused exploration of the EGNHI—the first nationwide implementation of GNH in the education sector.

**The Inception and Implementation of the Educating for GNH Initiative (EGNHI)**

Education is placed at the heart of Bhutan’s national goal of GNH and is identified as a “pre-requisite for achieving the wider social, cultural and economic goals set for the country within the national vision” (RGoB 2003, 1). In line with this vision, in December 2009, the EGNHI was launched at a week-long international educators’ conference held in Bhutan. Most of the major education stakeholders of Bhutan, including the then Prime Minister and Education

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6 The concept of Easterlin-paradox emerged from a study carried out by Richard Easterlin (1974) who found that even though income rose in the US from 1940s to 1970s, the average level of happiness among the Americans was not positively related to income growth.
Minister, were present at the conference. The conference was used as a platform to formulate how the EGNHI could be implemented in Bhutan’s schools. In order to provide training to educators in Bhutan on how to teach for GNH, a one-year and three-year target was set for all school principals and teachers respectively. Key concepts and specific pedagogies were also discussed during the conference and were identified as Educating for GNH practices. Finally, a profile of a GNH graduate (see Appendix 1) was developed as a goal of the initiative.

Since 2010, the EGNHI has been formally launched as a national education movement. In January and February 2010, three national workshops were held to familiarize all school principals in Bhutan with the EGNHI. A survey was conducted during these workshops to assess principals’ knowledge of principles, values, and practices related to GNH. Principals were also asked to share their views on the situation of primary and secondary education in Bhutan.

A guideline titled Educating for GNH: A Guide to Advancing Gross National Happiness was developed in 2010. Later, in 2012, a training manual titled Educating for GNH- A Training Manual was developed to serve as a workshop manual for trainers of the EGNHI. In order to fulfill the three-year target of providing every teacher in Bhutan with training on how to educate for GNH, a series of workshops on educating for GNH are to be provided each year (RGoB 2012a). In 2012, measures were also taken to infuse GNH in the colleges, including teacher-training colleges, under Bhutan’s only university, the Royal University of Bhutan (Young 2012). These steps clearly demonstrate Bhutan’s attempt to operationalize GNH through the education sector.

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7 Details of the workshop is provided in the document titled Final Proceedings of Gross National Happiness Workshop at http://www.gpiatlantic.org/pdf/educatingforgnh/educating_for_gnh_proceedings.pdf
8 The Report is available at http://gpiatlantic.org/bhutan/docs/summary_bhutan_princsurvey_report.pdf
Aside from the initial survey conducted in 2010 that gauged school principals’ understanding of GNH values, principals, and practices, no other studies have looked at the implementation and implications of the EGNHI since its launch as a nationwide educational movement. Given the relationship between state ideologies and educational institutions, an understanding of what educating for GNH means in the educational context might help understand what GNH means in the larger social context of Bhutan. However, in order to understand the implications of the EGNHI, some background to Bhutan’s current educational context is necessary.

**Context: Status of Education in Bhutan**

Prior to 1961, education in Bhutan was mainly provided through monastic schools with the exception of two schools that were established for the crown prince and a very small group of select students. It was only in 1961, when the first Five-year Plan was sanctioned, that the state took an active role in providing education to the entire nation.\(^9\) Between 1961 and 2012, Bhutan’s education sector witnessed growth in terms of number of schools and students. The number of schools and institutes increased from 11 to 670, with matching growth in enrollment from 400 to 188,214 students over the same time period (RGoB 2012c, 13-14). The net and gross enrollment rates for basic education, which consists of 11 years of compulsory education, have steadily increased over the years and currently stand at 94 percent and 108 percent, respectively (RGoB 2012c, 11).\(^{10}\)

However, these improvements mask the extent of inequality in the Bhutanese educational system. There are several disparities in educational attainment across the population. A 2012

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\(^9\) All developmental plans for the whole country are reflected in Five-year plan documents. These documents project the required budget, investments, and expected outcomes of all developmental activities for the given five years.

\(^{10}\) Basic education in Bhutan consist of 11 years of compulsory schooling starting at the entry level of Pre-primary (PP) to grade 10.
Bhutan Living Standards Survey Report compiled by the government showed that more than 55 percent of the population over six years old does not have any formal education (RGoB 2013a). Among those enrolled in school, only one in five attended grades 9-12 and only one in 16 advance beyond grade 12 (RGoB 2013b, 12). Data from the Ministry of Education showed that transition rates across the different levels of education decrease as the level advances.\(^{11}\) While 99 percent of students transition from primary to lower secondary level, the rate decreases to 95 percent at the lower secondary to middle secondary level, and to 71 percent at the middle secondary to higher secondary level (RGoB 2012c, 33). These transition rates suggest that even though enrollment rates are high, there are very few graduates from basic education, as students tend to drop out in the middle and higher secondary grades.

The 2012 Poverty Analysis Report (PAR) suggests that these education attainment differences reflect disparities between the wealthy and the poor population as well as differences across urban and rural populations (RGoB 2013c, 17). According to the PAR, the Gini index at the national level remained relatively equal from 2007-2012, at 0.35 and 0.36, respectively.\(^{12}\) Closer analysis of the Gini index for the same years for rural and urban regions suggests rising inequality: the index increased from 0.32 to 0.35 in urban areas and from 0.32 to 0.34 in rural areas (RGoB 2013b, 32-33).

Societal inequality has direct implications for the lives and learning experiences of Bhutanese children. Limited spaces in urban schools and long walking distances contribute to 7 percent of 6-12 year old children not currently in formal schools (RGoB 2012c, 29). Lack of adequate facilities in schools to accommodate children with disabilities also contribute to the

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\(^{11}\) Distribution of grades across the different levels of education: Primary level- grades PP to 6; lower secondary level- grades 7-8; middle secondary level- grade 9-10; higher secondary level- grades 11-12.

\(^{12}\) The Gini index ranges between 0 to 1 (with zero meaning perfect equality and one meaning perfect inequality). The typical values of the Gini coefficient is between 0.2 to 0.5 (RGoB 2013b, 24).
non-enrollment of primary school-aged children. Recent media coverage reinforces the severity of the impact of these issues on the lives and learning experiences of children in Bhutan.\textsuperscript{13} Several studies show that inequality has a negative effect on the level of happiness in various societies. This was found to be true for countries in Latin America (Graham and Felton 2005), Japan (Oshio and Kobayashi 2010), and the US (Oishi et al. 2011).

Therefore, an important aspect of any national education initiative to address the well-being and happiness of the people in Bhutan would be to address disparities related to inequality in the education sector and the society. Given the stark realities, examining the purpose and implications of the EGNHI becomes critically important to determine how these disparities are addressed by the initiative. This study seeks to understand the purpose and implications of the initiative by addressing the question: What does educating for GNH mean for teachers in Bhutan’s current context? I also examine whether the answer to this question points to implications for the learning experiences of students in Bhutan.

**Foundational and Contemporary Perspectives on the Relationship Between Education and Happiness**

*Foundational Perspectives: Plato and Aristotle on Education and Happiness*

Bhutan may be the first country in the world to pursue happiness through a nationwide educational initiative, but it is not the first to associate the purpose of education with happiness. Long before the development of the structured educational system that we have today, ancient philosophers debated questions familiar to contemporary philosophers and researchers: What is the purpose of education? Who should be educated? Who should be responsible for education?

Within these questions, many philosophers, educators, and researchers have tried to understand the purpose of education by exploring the relationship between education and happiness.

The Greek philosopher Plato (429-347 BC) argued in *The Republic* (trans.1963) that education is key in the creation of a just state and that a “just state” is a happy state. In Plato’s just society, happiness for all is emphasized over happiness for a few. Plato’s view of justice is based on the understanding that the right kind of education will enable all individuals to develop to their full potential and thereby enable them to find their places in society. The roles and positions of individuals in Plato’s just state are not predetermined by birth but are based on abilities enhanced and developed through education. Given the right education, Plato argued that anyone could become the “Philosopher King.”14 In sum, Plato’s philosophy positions education as a means to help individuals determine their purpose in life to find their own happiness.

Aristotle (384-322 BC) also believed that education enables individuals to find their place in the society. According to Aristotle (trans.1984), the pursuit of happiness, which he refers to as the “highest good,” is the purpose of life. He argues that development of a virtuous character is the means through which happiness, *eudaimonia*, is achieved and it is through education that the virtuous character is nurtured and developed. Therefore, the state is responsible for providing conditions necessary (i.e., education) for the development of capabilities and virtuous character.

Plato and Aristotle both viewed the relationship between education and happiness as one tied strictly to preparation of individuals to function to the best of their abilities in society. Inherent in the relationship between the state and education, and based on Plato and Aristotle’s understanding, is the responsibility of the state to provide the type of education necessary to help every individual develop the best of their abilities, and to allow all individual to find their place

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14 “Philosopher kings” are the leaders of the society in Plato’s Republic.
in society, enabling them to secure their well-being and happiness. The achievement of these objectives will be my focus in examining the purpose and implications of the EGNHI in Bhutan.

Contemporary Perspectives: Philosophy and Research

Like Plato and Aristotle, contemporary philosophers such as Robin Barrow and Nel Noddings have emphasized the purpose of education as preparations for individuals’ future roles in society. But unlike Plato and Aristotle, Barrow and Noddings have emphasized the present immediate emotional experiences of students in schools as an important factor of future experiences related to happiness.

Education-philosopher Barrow (1980) believed that education should be a happy experience for students. He identified three factors as crucial to this experience—security, self-esteem, and realism (126). According to Barrow, the existence of a secure environment, nurtured self-esteem, and a realistic outlook on life will contribute to the happiness of individuals. This means schools should put less emphasis on competitive achievement and more emphasis on providing students the ability to find happiness for themselves through cultivation of the right abilities related to self-esteem and realistic outlook on life.

Like Aristotle, Noddings (2003) recognized schools as an environment for human flourishing through the cultivation of intellectual and moral values. Education, through the cultivation of these virtues, helps individuals develop their best selves. Noddings argued that children learn best when they are happy (2003, 2). She also identified specific teaching strategies necessary for making learning a happy experience for all children in schools, including ethics of care, practicality of curriculum material, and learning material tailored to the specific interests of children. Noddings’ understanding of the relationship between happiness and education was tied
strongly to the idea of promoting a caring and compassionate environment for all to guarantee the well-being and happiness of everyone in the future.

While philosophers have explored the relationship between education and happiness as preparation of individuals to fulfill their future roles in society, researchers have explored the same relationship in a more immediate sense based on the type of experiences students have in school. For example, Parish et al. (2000) looked at students’ level of happiness in large metropolitan schools located in the American Midwest. The researchers found that the factors contributing most to the happiness of the students were related to social connections and interactions. Similarly, O’Rourke and Cooper (2010) examined factors contributing to the level of happiness of approximately 300 primary-aged children in Australia. They found that the strongest predictors of happiness among these students were sense of belongingness, optimism, and friendship.

While it would be useful to carry out similar empirical studies analyzing the level of happiness among students in Bhutan, one must first fully understand the implications of the current implementation of the EGNHI in Bhutan. It is precisely this aspect that I address in my analysis of the official documents and teacher responses.

Methodology: Data Sources and Analysis

Data Sources

To answer the question “What does educating for GNH mean for teachers in Bhutan’s current context?” I used two data sources: official documents developed in support of the EGNHI and teacher responses to an open-ended questionnaire. I analyze the two primary official documents, a training manual and a guideline, developed in support of the initiative to examine concepts and ideas the state promulgated in the name of educating for GNH. These concepts are
then compared with five teacher responses to an open-ended questionnaire to assess whether teachers’ views and practices are aligned with the official documents.

The first document, *Educating for GNH: A Guide to Advancing Gross National Happiness* (the Guidelines), was developed in 2010 and serves as the foundational document for the initiative. The Guidelines is available on the Ministry of Education’s curriculum website. The second document, *Educating for GNH- A Training Manual* (the Training Manual), was developed in 2012 as a training manual for individuals tasked with educating teachers on how to implement the EGNHI in classrooms. I contacted officials at the Ministry of Education via email to obtain the Training Manual. Without a specific educating for GNH curriculum, the Guidelines and Training Manual serve as the two main official documents directing the implementation of the EGNHI in Bhutan’s schools.

The Guidelines is the foundational document of the EGNHI. Therefore, the majority of the content, theme, and samples (e.g., lesson plans) in the Training Manual are taken from the Guidelines. As a result, approximately 40 percent of the pages of the two documents overlap. These details are provided in Table 1.

[Table 1: Details of Official Documents]

A comparison of the two official documents finds that the main difference lies in their format. The Guidelines is organized into four chapters, in which the key concepts related to educating for GNH are explained. The Training Manual, on the other hand, is organized into “units,” in which concepts related to the EGNHI is presented in smaller training sessions. The training manual also has a “reading and training material” section for each unit, which serves the same purpose as the Guidelines.

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An open-ended questionnaire (see Appendix II) was administered to five teachers in Bhutan to collect teacher reflections on the EGNHI. To address internal validity, the questionnaire was piloted to two teachers in Bhutan in February 2013. It was only after the pilot that five teachers were contacted to participate in the study. The participants were selected based on a convenience sampling strategy (Creswell 2009). Personal connections established from my previous work experience in the country allowed me to contact the principal of a middle secondary school in Bhutan, who then provided me with the contact information of five teachers from the same school. Complete details about these participants, including their pseudonyms, are presented in Table 2.

[Table 2: Details of Teacher Participants]

All five participants were female and had taught for an average of 7.2 years. The lack of male representation in my sample is a limitation of my study as male teachers constitute 60 percent of the entire teaching cadre in Bhutan (RGoB 2012c, 3). As it is possible that male teachers have different experiences and concerns with the EGNHI that might need to be taken into consideration, this could be an area of future research.

The participants covered most of the grades and subjects required at the basic compulsory education level in Bhutan. Although not asked specifically in the questionnaire, three out of the five teachers stated that they attended training workshops on educating for GNH.

In terms of data collection methodology, the participants were contacted via email in March 2013 and were asked to answer twelve open-ended questions related to their views and practice of the EGNHI in their schools and classrooms. Teachers were given ten days to respond to the questions. Email correspondence was identified as the best method as all participants were

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16 Basic education level, which is compulsory, in Bhutan covers grade PP (pre-primary) to grade 10.
residing in Bhutan. Some of the participants had limited access to internet; therefore, an interview via Skype or similar software was not feasible. In addition, email correspondence also helped keep automatic record of the actual responses from the participants for future reference, if necessary. A limitation of data collection via email was the total dependence on written reflections of teacher practices since I was unable to observe classroom practices firsthand.

Data analysis

The EGNHI is an emerging phenomenon in the field of education in Bhutan— one that is yet to be explored empirically. Thus, the emergent nature of my study called for an exploratory and interpretative approach using qualitative methodology (Merriam 2002; Creswell 2009). I used a line-by-line multiple coding process to organize and record the number of occurrences (based on frequency counts) of a particular concept (Charmaz 1983). The highest occurring concepts, reported as findings, were derived from descriptive codes based on emergent themes in the data (Graue and Walsh 1998; Taylor and Bogdan 1998). I used the software tool Microsoft Excel to record and organize the most commonly occurring concepts as my findings.

What does Educating for GNH mean?

“Bhutan’s vision of development is based on the principles of Gross National Happiness (GNH). As education is the cornerstone of all progress in a society, this vision has been incorporated into the education system through Educating for GNH, an initiative that promotes holistic, contemplative, eco-sensitive, and culturally responsive educational approaches that are both taught and put into practice.”

- Draft National Education Policy (RGoB 2012d, 5)

Overall, the findings from my analysis of teacher responses and official documents are consistent with the definition of the EGNHI provided in the draft National Education Policy. EGNHI is presented as an initiative focused on educational approaches directed at implementing GNH in Bhutan’s schools. I present the specifics of my findings in three parts: document
analysis; analysis of teacher responses; and comparative analysis of official documents and teacher responses.

Document Analysis

The most commonly occurring concepts associated with the EGNHI in both documents are “teaching values,” “media literacy,” “meditation,” and “environmentalism.” “Teaching values” and “environmentalism” are emphasized more in the Guidelines: “teaching values” occurs 237 times in the Guidelines compared to 186 times in the Training Manual; “environmentalism” appears 54 times in the Guidelines while it appears only 27 times in the Training Manual. In contrast, “media literacy” and “meditation” are emphasized more in the Training Manual: “media literacy” occurs 184 times in the Training Manual and 160 times in the Guidelines; “meditation” appears 169 times in the Training Manual while it appears only 70 times in the Guidelines.

A specific definition of “teaching values” is not provided in either document. However, the references to “values” appear to be based on practices and concepts that relate to the four pillars of GNH: sustainable and equitable socio-economic development; environmental preservation; promotion and preservation of culture; and good governance. “Media literacy” is defined as “the skill or the ability to consume or participate with the media critically [and] involves the skills to access, analyze, evaluate and produce media” in the Training Manual (RGoB 2012b, 73). It is unclear as to why “media literacy” is emphasized so strongly in both documents. It is possible that Bhutan’s late introduction to cable television and internet (both introduced in 1999) raised concerns among policy-makers on how information from the media would be consumed by the general population. As a predominantly Buddhist nation with Mahayana Buddhism recognized as the state religion, the emphasis on “meditation” is not
surprising. The focus on teaching “environmentalism” could be a result of the increasing global concern regarding environmental issues. In addition, environmental preservation is one of the four pillars of GNH. “GNH as a developmental concept” is referenced in equal measure in both documents and refers to any mention made about the concept of GNH and its four pillars as examples of educating for GNH.

Despite these similarities, a few concepts are emphasized significantly more in one document than the other. For example, the Training Manual emphasizes “positive disciplining” and “rights” much more than the Guidelines.\(^\text{17}\) The Training Manual mentions “positive disciplining” 45 times, while the Guidelines only mentions it twice.\(^\text{18}\) The Training Manual refers to “rights” 34 times, compared to nine in the Guidelines. Since the Training Manual was developed two years after the Guidelines, it is possible that these concepts were added to supplement the shortcomings of the Guidelines. It could also be that as a teacher-training manual, the Training Manual is intended to be more hands-on and practical for teachers to use. Moreover, recent media coverage of the ongoing practice of corporal punishment in Bhutanese schools, despite its prohibition, could have prompted policy-makers to place greater emphasis on positive discipline in the training manual as a way of addressing the rising concern regarding the practice of corporal punishment in Bhutanese classrooms.\(^\text{19}\)

Both documents emphasize teachers as the main force behind the success of the realization, implementation, and success of the EGNHI. For example, teachers are presented as

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\(^\text{17}\) In the document, “rights” seems to refer to both human rights and child rights interchangeably.

\(^\text{18}\) Positive discipline is presented as an alternative practice to corporal punishment in Bhutan.

the facilitators of the EGNHI and described as the “interface between the program and the students” in the Training Manual (RGoB 2012b, viii). Given this emphasis on the role of teachers in realizing the goal of GNH, I turn to my next presentation of analysis of teacher reflections in order to examine how teachers view their roles and experiences with the initiative.

**Analysis of Teacher Responses**

The most significant concepts related to educating for GNH in the teacher responses were “teaching values,” followed by “meditation,” and then “environmentalism.” All five teachers referred to these concepts. Collectively, “teaching values” was mentioned 49 times, “meditation” 18 times, and “environmentalism” 16 times. These concepts, with the exception of media literacy, reflect what was found in the analysis of the official documents.

There were no significant differences in teacher responses across the questions based on years of experience, grades, or subject taught. Instead, the key-differentiating factor was whether or not the teacher had attended an educating for GNH workshop. The three teachers who attended the workshop (Karma, Sonam, and Ugyen) gave more than two examples in answer to the question: “How exactly do you practice educating for GNH in your class? Could you provide me some examples (at least two examples please).” It appears that those who explicitly stated that they attended the educating for GNH workshop were eager to demonstrate that they were well-informed about the initiative. The teachers who attended the workshop also used specific terms found in the official documents such as “green school approach,” “positive disciplining,” “media literacy,” and “direct integration” in their responses. Geography teacher Karma’s example of “positive disciplining” as an educating for GNH practice was taken directly from page 62 of the Training Manual. Ugyen (science teacher for 10 years) and Sonam (English and history teacher for six years) also stated that teaching about GNH and its four pillars was an
example of teaching for GNH. It appears that attending the workshop exerted a strong influence on the responses that teachers provided about the initiative.

In contrast, the two teachers who did not attend the workshop (Tshering and Dorji) shared views that were not strictly aligned with the official documents. This however does not mean that Tshering and Dorji are unaware of what is stressed in the documents since they also emphasized the same concepts as those who attended the workshops. What differed were the examples they provided. These two teachers gave their own examples, which were not taken directly from the documents, and provided the minimum number of examples (two examples) requested in the questionnaire. They were also the only teachers who cited becoming a “good human being” as an outcome and example of educating for GNH in their responses.

Despite these minor differences in responses based on workshop attendance, all five teachers stated that they have faced challenges in teaching for GNH. The majority of the teachers (four) observed that “integration of values,” which is encouraged in both official documents, is a challenge while teaching. According to Karma, integrating values into lessons is a challenge because “sometimes the topic of the lesson does not hold any values.” The teacher responses suggest that teachers feel compelled to “teach” values in every lesson across all subjects as a requirement of the EGNHI. It also appears that in this process, teachers feel overburdened by having to develop value-oriented lesson plans for every class and often feel confused about their own teaching methodologies. For instance, the two documents suggest the removal of negative and violent materials in the syllabus as a way of educating for GNH. Ugyen interprets this as having to show YouTube videos of chemistry experiments instead of actually carrying out the experiments in order to keep the students safe. As a science teacher, she finds it particularly “hard to infuse values while teaching subjects such as mathematics and chemistry.”
Besides these small differences, all teachers had a general understanding of teaching for GNH as something that is rooted in teaching of values, environmentalism, and practice of meditation. All teachers found educating for GNH demanding with over half of them citing the “integration of values” across lessons and subjects as the biggest challenge.

**Comparative Analysis of Official Documents and Teacher Responses**

Comparative analyses of official documents and teacher responses show that teachers are aware of the official approaches to educating for GNH but only on a conceptual level. On a practical level, all teachers reported facing challenges while implementing the strategies advocated by the two official documents. Thus, there is a clear disconnect between the reality of challenges faced in the classroom and the strategies recommended in the official documents. Teachers struggle with “large classroom strength” and their inability to address the needs of “special children.”\(^\text{20}\) They expressed a need for more training as well as resources to deal with these challenges. According to Sonam, “We have special children in our classes and actually for those children we need to have separate activities but since we are not specialized to deal with children with special needs, we do face problems.” Both documents do not assist the teachers on how to deal with children with disabilities. In fact, the Training Manual makes no mention of children with disabilities. The Guidelines refers to use of “inclusive practices to address the special needs of all learners” as an “Indicator” of a GNH school (RGoB 2010, 37). This is the only instance where the special needs of learners are mentioned. The challenges faced by these teachers are consistent with findings from a study conducted by Chapman and Johnstone (2009) who looked at the implementation of inclusive education pedagogies in Lesotho and found that teachers failed to understand the larger education goals and philosophies, as they had not been

\(^{20}\)“Large classroom strength” refers to high student-teacher ratio and “special children” refers to children with disabilities.
trained properly. They found that training provided little emphasis on how diverse learners’ needs could be met in large classrooms and this created a lack of understanding about inclusive education among teachers in Lesotho.

Teachers also struggle to understand the purpose of certain concepts emphasized in the official documents. Ugyen asserted that allowing children to “voice out”, which means speak out and express themselves, during classroom decision-making processes is a right of the child and an educating for GNH practice. However, she fails to understand why this is important. She shared that while framing classroom rules and regulations, she aligns with GNH practice by allowing her students to “voice out” as a way of training children “to follow rules so that they will have no problem following certain rules at home or in their workplace in the future.” Similarly, Karma shared that the practice of “positive disciplining” was a challenge because it made classroom management difficult since children felt “free and relax[ed]” in such an environment. Teachers in Bhutan face these challenges because Bhutanese teachers are used to traditional teaching methodology (Young 2012). Even though the Training Manual attempts to address this issue by emphasizing learner-centered methodologies, teachers still require additional training, as they do not know how to deal with indiscipline or manage large class sizes.

Teachers are also presented as key drivers of the EGNHI. This role is explicitly stated in the Training Manual, which emphasizes teachers as the only “medium through which GNH values and principles [are] infused into the curriculum, classroom, school system and education system at large” (RGoB 2012b, 2). Responses to the questionnaire suggest that all teachers, regardless of whether or not they had attended the workshop, are aware of this expectation. However, Tshering, who did not attend the workshop, shared conflicting views about her role as
the “message and the medium” of GNH. Tshering’s response to the question, “Did you face some challenges while teaching for GNH? Could you please share some examples?” best exemplifies her concerns:

“I know that when educating for GNH, the teacher is the ‘message and the medium’ so I play a vital role, but my role as teacher and me, Tshering, are often poles apart. I am a free spirit with more liberal views. For example, I personally have no problem with children coloring or keeping long lock. In fact, given the chance, I would love to color my hair purple. I mean as long as students don’t compromise their studies and behavior. I strongly feel that people shouldn’t be judged by how they look from the outside. But being a Bhutanese and a teacher really puts pressure on the inner me. So I say and do things as a teacher which, if I had been in any other profession, I wouldn’t.”

Tshering’s response brings the paradox of the current implementation of the EGNHI to the forefront. As a part of the initiative, teachers and students in Bhutan are faced with two contradictory expectations. While teachers are expected to teach about values and help students feel free and calm by practicing meditation, they are also expected to enforce strict rules that infringe upon personal choices of students, such as keeping “long locks” (long hair). Tshering also noted her frustrations with the assessment system in Bhutan’s schools, which she feels “allows no opportunities for students to explore or develop other ways of learning.” Tshering is referring to the current assessment system in Bhutan, which is based completely on highly rigid competitive exams.

In sum, teachers are aware of the educating for GNH means based on official documents and their expected role in the endeavor, but they unanimously share concerns about the implementation of the initiative. Their concerns are tied to the need of basic teaching knowledge and strategies, as well as teaching conditions that are conducive to learning for students (e.g., smaller class sizes).
The Way Forward: Happiness is Freedom

The current implementation of the EGNHI appears to differ from foundational and contemporary perspectives on the relationship between education and happiness. The lack of conducive learning environments, the tendency to adhere to strict traditional teaching methodologies, strong emphasis on competitive examinations, and the imposition of harsh rules on students, all suggest complete disregard of the immediate positive emotional and psychological learning experiences of children in classrooms as emphasized by Barrow (1980) and Noddings (2003). Moreover, strong emphasis on teaching values in every lesson seems to make teaching subjects such as mathematics and science difficult for some teachers. As a result, students might learn good values but at the expense of valuable skills and knowledge related to their academic subjects. Such practices hinder the purpose of education as a platform for building the capabilities of individuals to find their place in society as expressed by Plato and Aristotle. A balanced and realistic emphasis of teaching values in lessons is therefore necessary so that students are able to develop all the necessary abilities required to achieve well-being and happiness.

The comparative analysis of teacher responses and official documents suggests three broad implications for the EGNHI. First, the state knows what happiness means for all individuals in society as the official government documents emphasize specific concepts related to GNH. Second, GNH can be achieved through the practice of certain teaching approaches in the classrooms. Third, teachers bear primary responsibility for achieving GNH in Bhutanese society. The analysis also makes it clear that the Bhutanese educational system fails to address existing problems related to basic teaching and learning conditions. There appears to be a general disconnect between official recommendations and daily demands faced by teachers in the
classroom. As a result, the ultimate expected outcomes of the EGNHI are not achieved and teachers feel inadequate, over-burdened, and challenged.

These implications raise several questions regarding the current implementation of the EGNHI in Bhutan. Does what constitutes happiness mean the same for all individuals in a society? Is it enough to focus on teaching values, media literacy, meditation, and environmentalism to achieve GNH through the educational system in Bhutan? Is it the responsibility of teachers alone to achieve GNH in society?

It is apparent that the EGNHI needs a reconsideration of focus and responsibility—one that is rooted in the concept of freedom as emphasized in Buddhist philosophy (Dalai Lama 1999, 2009) and economist-philosopher Amartya Sen’s capability approach theory (1985, 1999). For the purpose of this paper, the aspect of freedom in Buddhist philosophy that is applied to EGNHI is freedom the relates to the removal of conditions that impede progress towards well-being and happiness, i.e., freedom from harm and suffering. Freedom in capability approach theory supplements the concept of freedom embraced in Buddhist philosophy by emphasizing the provision of choices and systems (e.g., social arrangements) to individuals in society for the development of their capabilities, thereby enabling them to make choices that lead to their well-being and happiness. Consideration of these two approaches re-orients the purpose and responsibility of the EGNHI in two ways: first, to focus on removal of obstacles to freedom (Buddhist philosophy) and second, provision of services and conditions that promote freedom (capability approach theory). Such an approach could better guide the EGNHI in achieving its primary goal: a society where individuals are empowered to achieve their well-being and happiness.
**Buddhism: Freedom from Harm and Suffering**

GNH is a Buddhism-inspired concept but one that is based on a secular foundation with universal moral significance. Therefore, the application of Buddhist philosophy to GNH is related to the universal values and principles of Buddhist philosophy not practices related to Buddhist rituals and prayers. According to the Dalai Lama (2009), “The purpose of life is happiness.” However, in Buddhist philosophy, happiness is not to be confused with pleasure; pleasure is associated with transient feelings and emotions, whereas happiness describes finding meaning and purpose in life and is therefore a broader conception than simply feelings or emotions (Dalai Lama 1999, 2009; Flanagan 2011). Happiness in the context of GNH and the EGNHI is consistent with this description.

Based on these distinctions, I argue that fundamental to the concept of GNH, and by extension, the EGNHI in Bhutan should be the Buddhist perception of freedom; freedom from harm and suffering. Essential to Buddhism is the idea that all individuals consistently seek freedom from suffering, which is the first noble truth of Buddhist philosophy (Niwano 1971). The concept of freedom represents a form of liberation from suffering and harm as one proceeds to find meaning and purpose of life, which ultimately leads to happiness. It is this aspect of Buddhist philosophy that is fundamental to GNH.

In the most practical sense, GNH as a concept emphasizes the removal of obstacles and “negativities” that increase suffering and impede the realization of GNH. GNH, as a policy, seeks to remove those conditions that may cause harm in the political, social, and economic lives of Bhutanese people, while promoting conditions that enable individuals to move along the path.

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21 The application of Buddhist philosophy to the concept of GNH is not out of context given that Bhutan’s state religion is Mahayana Buddhism with approximately 76 percent of the population declared as Buddhists. The remaining population is mainly Hindus with less than 1 percent Christians (RGoB 2005).
to the realization of their well-being and happiness (Mancall 2004, 27). This directive is applicable to EGNHI. The EGNHI should therefore focus on providing conditions that remove the immediate suffering of children and teachers in the classroom. For example, this requires providing the necessary training to teachers to help them address the needs of children with disabilities as well as providing positive support to children instead of punishing them. It also requires ensuring that facilities and resources are provided to help students thrive in the classroom. This might mean reducing the number of hours children have to walk to get to school in Bhutan or providing proper boarding facilities for children if they are required to be away from home, especially in rural areas. Misconceptions related to basic rights of the child as well as the purpose behind emphasis of “positive disciplining” should be addressed so that teachers do not see these practices as a burden to their teaching. In essence, educating for GNH should focus on addressing the immediate learning experiences of children to make learning a positive experience in Bhutan’s schools.

**Capability Approach Theory: Freedom to Develop Capabilities and Functionings**

Sen (1985) contends that happiness is an inadequate measure of well-being and functioning as it is interpreted in the utilitarian tradition. He believes that happiness is a mental state that ignores other important aspects of well-being. In order to address Sen’s reservations regarding the concept of happiness, I make the distinction that happiness in the context of GNH is not related to mental states but one that encompasses finding meaning and purpose in life. This description is consistent with the one provided in the preceding section.

Based on this understanding, I use Sen’s capability approach theory (1999), to argue that any nation-state emphasizing GNH as a national educational goal needs to create the conditions necessary to provide every individual with the freedom to develop to the best of his or her
capabilities, to enable every individual to live and choose the type of life they value. I propose that the EGNHI should focus on creating conditions for children to develop to their full potential, thereby enabling them to choose the type of lives that leads towards well-being and happiness.

The concept of freedom as emphasized in capability approach theory (Sen 1999) buttresses the concept of freedom described in Buddhist philosophy. Freedom in the capabilities approach theory is not merely the absence of restrictions; it includes the possession of different “capabilities” to achieve valuable “functioning” in a society (Sen, 1999). “Capabilities” refers to what individuals are able to do and become in a society. It is the ability and freedom of a person to achieve “functioning,” which are beings and doings that are outgrowths or realizations of capabilities, e.g., working, being literate, healthy, being part of a community, being respected, etc. (Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 1999). According to Sen (1999), the development of individuals’ capabilities leads to the enhancement of their functioning, which in turn enables individuals to live and choose a life of well-being and happiness.

Alexander (2008) explains the concept of Sen’s notion of freedom with the following example: If a person is poor, uneducated, unemployed, or afflicted by a preventable disease, then he or she is denied freedom in the context of the capability approach theory even though the state or fellow citizens do not impose any restrictions on the person. Freedom is denied in this scenario because society has failed to provide the necessary social structures to build the capability of the individual to avoid the shortfalls of deprivation and injustice. This concept of freedom points to the implications of the EGNHI on the state: what kind of conditions should the state provide to enable the pursuit of GNH through its educational system?

The state has a critical role in ensuring the success of the EGNHI by creating the necessary conditions, including training and resources, to ensure that all children are learning in
an environment that enables them to move along the path to achieving well-being and happiness. The application of the concept of freedom based on the capability approach to the EGNHI reinforce existing philosophies. Researchers in the last decade (e.g., Saito 2003; Unterhalter 2009; Walker 2005, 2012) have embraced the capability approach as espousing the appropriate principles to inform the purpose of education in societies. Sen (1999) and Nussbaum (1990) identify education as central to the development of all human capabilities. According to Nussbaum (1990), all citizens should receive the institutional, material, and educational support that they require to function at a level as their natural abilities and circumstances allow them. Citing Aristotle, Nussbaum argues, “No citizen should be lacking in sustenance and support.” She contends that political institutions should make decisions oriented to the provision of all basic necessities (e.g., water, health, education) in societies.

Findings from my study suggests that while teachers are important mediums in the implementation of the EGNHI, they need support in the form of training, as well as appropriate facilities if they are to contribute to the development of children's capabilities. Significantly, many of the challenges faced by teachers in Bhutan are rooted in inequality that exists in the larger social sphere, and needs to be addressed at the state level. For example, children walking to and from school for hours on a daily basis, children studying in classrooms without furniture, and children living in temporary huts to attend school are just a few of the examples that transfer responsibility for ensuring the success of the EGNHI back to the state. It is difficult for teachers in Bhutan to implement the principles of the EGNHI when they are required to work in

an environment that does not fully meet the basic requirements for provision of quality education.

**Conclusion**

The EGNHI signifies an important aspect of Bhutan’s attempt to operationalize the overarching national philosophy of GNH. The concept of GNH may be unique to Bhutan, but the approach of using the education sector to promote national developmental policies is ubiquitous. Many nation-states have highlighted the advantages and disadvantages of the using the education sector to propagate state ideologies; education has the power to bring success or failure to a nation. Fortunately, for Bhutan, the EGNHI is motivated by noble intentions to increase the well-being and happiness of the people in the country. However, examination of the current implementation of the EGNHI points out that intention is not enough to guarantee the success of a noble initiative—the approach is also equally, if not more, important.

The current approach to implementing GNH through teachers and pedagogical strategies aimed at imparting concepts related to values, meditation, and environmentalism is not adequate to ensuring the success of the EGNHI. Despite challenges related to training and teaching conditions, expressed by the teacher participants of the study, there are other concerns related to such an approach. To emphasize certain concepts and qualities of individuals (e.g., the GNH graduate presented as Appendix I) as goals of educating for GNH implies that the state knows what happiness means for every individual in the society. Such an approach is misleading and misconstrues the philosophy behind the concept of GNH. It also does not align with the practices embraced in a vibrant democratic society, which is what Bhutan aspires to become.

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My findings highlight the need for closer consideration of the practical challenges faced by students and teachers in Bhutan’s current context. The application of the concept of freedom as defined in Buddhist philosophy and capability approach theory emphasizes two fundamental ideas. First, basic needs, in addition to educational approaches, must be satisfied in order to decrease suffering and increase opportunities that enable children to move towards GNH. Second, increased commitment on the part of the state in ensuring that these necessary conditions are provided to help all children develop to the best of their abilities. In order to apply these ideas, it is critically important that policy-makers listen to the needs and concerns shared by teachers and students. This will enable policy-makers to focus on practical improvements in the teaching and learning environment.

Several avenues can be pursued to address these challenges. First, future studies can focus on how the concept of freedom can be practically applied to the EGNHI. Second, urban and rural teachers across the country can be asked to share their reflections about the initiative. Third, students can be asked to express their experiences with the EGNHI. Fourth, classroom observations can be carried out to explore firsthand the experiences of teachers and students in Bhutan with the EGNHI. All these measures could assist the formulation of practical recommendations for how the implementation of the EGNHI could be enhanced to achieve GNH in the society.

Without the foundations for happiness (capabilities and freedoms), Bhutan cannot hope to educate for GNH. If the significance and necessity of the concept of freedom is not taken into consideration while implementing the EGNHI, it is possible that the ultimate goal of achieving GNH in the society will not be realized. Eighth century Buddhist scholar Śāntideva’s quote aptly cautions the vulnerabilities of the current approach of the EGNHI in Bhutan: “Although having
the mind that wishes to shun suffering, they rush headlong into suffering itself. Although wishing for happiness, yet out of naïveté, they destroy their own happiness as if it were a foe.” The examination of the EGNHI makes it abundantly clear that unless there is a comprehensive state education strategy that focuses not just on pedagogy but also on the creation of a supportive environment for education, the goals of educating for GNH may not be realized.

Although government documents (e.g., national Five-year Plans) reflect state plans to address issues related to accessibility and quality of education as a national development plan, these goals have to be consciously tied to the EGNHI for it to be implemented as a comprehensive education strategy. The success of an education initiative does not depend on teachers and education strategies alone; it also depends on the combination of efforts from the state as well as provision of the necessary conditions for teaching and learning to flourish. This is because success in the educational system is tied to the conditions in the larger society. This requires that larger social inequalities be addressed as a part of the EGNHI. Social inequality is not only responsible for increased level of unhappiness among people in a society; it is the driving force behind the growing gap between the rich and the poor. Therefore, reorienting the EGNHI towards an approach that embraces freedom as interpreted in Buddhist philosophy and capability approach theory would ensure that all conditions necessary to ensure that the basic needs of all children are placed at the heart of the initiative, thereby allowing them to more fully pursue well-being and happiness through the education system.
References


TABLE 1

DETAILS OF OFFICIAL GOVERNMENT DOCUMENTS ON EDUCATING FOR GNH

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Document Title</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Year of Publication</th>
<th>Total Number of Pages (Excluding “Title” and &quot;Contents&quot; Pages)</th>
<th>Overlaps Across Topics and Themes (%)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Educating for Gross National Happiness: A Training Manual</td>
<td>Ministry of Education, Bhutan</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>Approximately 40% of the pages in the two documents overlap</td>
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TABLE 2

DETAILS OF TEACHER PARTICIPANTS

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<th>Participant*</th>
<th>Sex</th>
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<th>Subjects Taught</th>
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* Participants' names are pseudonyms
** Pre-primary- Entry level for primary school
*** All subjects (for grades PP-2) refers to English, Dzongkha (national Language), Environmental Studies (taught in Dzongkha), and Mathematics
APPENDIX I

PORTRAIT OF A GROSS NATIONAL HAPPINESS GRADUATE
(Source: Educating for GNH Guidelines (p.43) and the GNH Training Manual (p.11))
APPENDIX II

QUESTIONNAIRE DEVELOPED FOR TEACHERS

Please note that you are not required to answer all these questions in one sitting but at your own convenience. Please also note that there are no limitations in terms of words and length of your responses.

I. Background information:

1. How many years have you been teaching?

2. Which grade/s do you teach and what subject/s? (Please list all)

II. The following questions are related to the Educating for GNH Initiative.

1. What are the few things that come to your mind when you hear the words “Educating for GNH”?

2. Do you practice it in your classrooms?

3. When did you start teaching for GNH?

4. How prepared were you?

5. How exactly do you practice Educating for GNH in your class? Could you provide me some examples (at least two examples please)

6. Do other teachers in your school teach for GNH? If yes, can you please give examples of how they practice it? (at least two examples please)

7. What Educating for GNH resources (e.g., curriculum/manual) do you have to access to? Please list all.

8. Did you face any challenges while teaching for GNH? Could you please share some examples?

9. Are there any suggestions you would like to make for improvement in the practice of Educating for GNH in schools?

10. What are the outcomes (goals and expectations) of the Educating for GNH program on your students? Please provide me with three specific examples.