

## Inclusion of the Child Friendly School Concept into Formal Teacher Education in Bhutan

Rinchen Dorji\*



Perched in the heart of the Himalayas, the Kingdom of Bhutan has a unique history of development of a formal education system. In the early 1960s, Bhutan opened its doors to the rest of the world and the forces of change and modernisation. Since the start of the First Five Year Plan in 1961 remarkable progress has been made in the field of education. Access to basic education is now the right of all Bhutanese and it is the key to most of the nation's development objectives.

The government aspires to develop an education system which provides access to a free (at least at the primary level) and a wholesome education for all children. Formal education in Bhutan consists of six years of primary education (including one year pre-primary), two years of lower secondary and two years of middle secondary education, two years of higher secondary and three years of college education. The official age for children to attend formal schooling (pre-primary) is 6 years. However, education even at the primary level is not yet completely free, neither is it compulsory.

The concept of Child Friendly School with the five dimensions based on the Convention on the Rights of Children (CRC) has been ratified by Bhutan as one of the first nations in the world. This has created new enthusiasm for improving the education system. Bhutan has known

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\*Lecturer, National Institute of Education (NIE), Paro, Bhutan.

and worked with ideas such as caring schools, holistic education, wholesome education, which all include aspects of the Child Friendly School (CFS) concept.

### **Including the Child Friendly School (CFS) Concept into Teacher Education**

Instead of introducing CFS as a new idea the concept is being integrated into the existing pre-service teacher education curriculum in the two National Institutes of Education. The UNESCO toolkit on Inclusive Learning Friendly Environment (ILFE) is being used in teacher training as well as for the development of in-service teacher education workshops and a module on inclusive education/child friendly schools for distance in-service education.

The existing pre-service teacher education curriculum is currently being reviewed and revised. It is understood by all involved that including the CFS concept and ILFE into the teacher training curriculum will help create a better balance between theory and practice in the different modules. Integrating the CFS concept into the teacher education curriculum will not just only make future teachers conscious about this concept, but will also support the nation's developmental philosophy of *Gross National Happiness*.

### **How to Integrate the CFS Concept into the Existing Teacher Education Curriculum?**

The five dimensions of CFS are being infused into the following existing modules:

- (i) **Child Development** – Although student teachers are exposed to different aspects of child growth and development, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) has not been discussed in the past. The CRC will now be one of the introductory topics under this particular module. Thus, the aim of establishing right based child friendly schools will be addressed through this course in the future. The concept of pro-actively seeking out all children irrespective of status, background and ability (First Dimension of CFS) will help student teachers and practising teachers to realise that all children have equal rights to quality education. The issue of gender sensitivity (fourth dimension of CFS) will also be covered in this course under Individual Differences, which is a topic that is discussed at length within this module.
- (ii) **Learning Process** – In this module the potential role that family and community play in children's overall learning will be emphasised more (Fifth dimension of CFS). This will help student teachers to bridge school learning with other forms of learning taking place in family and in the community. It will also encourage teachers to invite community participation in school activities, which will make children's education more contextual and relevant (Second Dimension of

CFS). The importance of providing a healthy and a protective learning environment in school (Third Dimension of CFS) is also covered in this module. This particular module will also table such critical issues as how to make children's learning more participatory and empowering.

**(iii) Education for Development and Bhutanese Education System –**

This course includes discussion about the general background of school organisation. Involving parents, families, and community (Fifth Dimension of CFS) in education is also covered under this module. In general, parent-teacher conferences are poorly attended either because they are busy or because parents often feel intimidated by the school

authorities' indifference or teachers' unfriendly and unwelcoming attitude. Building a school-community partnership, where parents feel accepted and involved as a part of the school community – Schools could explore possibilities of tapping community resources not just in terms of cash or kind, but even more in using the available community knowledge and skills in contributing to children's classroom learning.

**(iv) Teaching Skills I and II and Teaching Strategies –**

These two modules provide student-teachers with the knowledge and skills of lesson planning. Gender sensitivity (Fourth Dimension) and quality teaching and effectiveness (Second Dimension) will be better



integrated into these modules. The school being *healthy and protective* (Third Dimension) is also indirectly touched in these modules as part of effective classroom management skills and questioning skills, in which teachers are expected to ask questions in a non-threatening way to make students feel at ease.

**(v) Introduction to School Guidance and Counselling –**

There are two introductory modules on youth guidance and school counselling, which comprises basic counselling processes and skills and some major theories of counselling. Creating a school that is healthy and protective (Third Dimension) and gender and diversity responsive (First and Fourth Dimension) is already integrated into this module, but can be improved.

**Practising What We Preach**

The teacher training institutes in Bhutan plays a crucial role in promoting and strengthening the concept of CFS based on the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). The two teacher training institutes in the country could reflect on its existing practices in the light of the following areas to see, if the institutes are trainee friendly.

How do trainees participate in the development of teacher education curriculum, e.g. in the present process of reviewing and restructuring the curriculum?

How do the institutes involve trainees in taking decisions that would affect their life in the institute?

How healthy and protective is the environment at the institutes for trainees? Are there written policies and regulations that support and protect trainees' rights, needs and welfare?

Do trainees have access to safe drinking water and adequate water supply to maintain a healthy and hygienic lifestyle?

How healthy and hygienic are the toilet facilities at the institutes?

How effective and relevant are the teacher education modules offered in the different phases of the training programme? How do the institutes maintain a good balance between theory and practice– both at institute level and related to school realities?

Are there gender issues at the institutes? How do the institutes address such problems and issues, if any? How are gender related rights protected? What is the gender balance among trainees? Is this different for B.Ed., primary and secondary education, and if so, why? Are support services (guidance and counselling) available at the institutes for trainees, and if so, how effective are these?

How do the institutes contribute to the development of the community? Is there any mutually supportive partnership between the institutes and the community?

Addressing these and other issues at institute level and further improving and strengthening existing practices

would ultimately contribute to better teacher education institutes for teacher trainees, which can pose as a model for Child Friendly School development.

Student teachers who have been trained and groomed in a Trainee/ Student Friendly Institute will probably internalise the concept of Child Friendly Schools more easily and implement such an approach in the schools they are posted in after graduation throughout Bhutan.

### **Conclusion**

The strategy adopted by the Royal Government of Bhutan and the Ministry of Education to include the Child Friendly School and ILFE concept into pre-service and in-service teacher training has been very positive.

Further capacity building on CFS development has been officially taken on as part of the regular in-service teacher training, while the pre-service curriculum is being reviewed and improved towards a more child friendly school development approach.

With the support from the Royal Government of Bhutan with a vision of making education more wholesome and holistic, and transforming our schools into places where children feel accepted and trusted, irrespective of their socio-economic background, abilities, language, ethnicity, or other differences and finally, a place where children can find the opportunities to develop to their fullest extent possible is not far away.

