

LESSONS *from* BHUTAN

EMBRACE CULTURAL DIFFERENCES TO EFFECT CHANGE

By Laurie Levine, Alison Telsey, and Kim McCormack

Nestled in the Himalayan Mountains, Bhutan, a Buddhist country, is one of the most isolated nations in the world. After spending a month there, we all agreed it deserved its title of “The Last Shangri-La.” Our team of professional development specialists spent the summer of 2010 providing professional development in the basic principles of special education to teachers, administrators, and government officials. At the end of our visit, we left with a new appreciation of the need for all professional developers to become more aware of cultural differences both overt and subtle. In the process, we sharpened our skills, increased our cultural sensitivities, and came back to the United States as more effective and more broadly engaged staff developers.

Before the Special Education Project began in Bhutan, there were limited services for children with disabilities, with the exception of the blind and deaf population. Our challenge was formidable: How do we train teachers and administrators to expand special education in a country with few services, a lack of required resource materials, and a dearth of basic infrastructure?

BACKGROUND

The Special Education Project was launched by an American family, Ruedi and Alix Laager. They are raising a child with special needs and have a long-standing

relationship with the people of Bhutan. Thanks to their interest and generosity, combined with a request for assistance from the Bhutanese government, the project began in 2008. The Laagers forged a working collaboration with the Bhutan Foundation, the Ministry of Education, and the Youth Development Fund. The family also formed a U.S. advisory committee to assist in further developing special education priorities and suggested practices. Since the project’s inception, there have been many activities to promote special education, including visits from Bhutanese officials to the U.S. to observe special education programs, training and on-site coaching by volunteers, and guidance in developing special education policies. During the summer of 2010, our team provided a three-day workshop for teachers, principals, and officials on best practices, a two-day stakeholders meeting with representatives from the government and nonprofit organizations, and on-site coaching in two of the designated pilot schools. The Bhutanese have welcomed and embraced the expertise and technical assistance from the American specialists and are committed to continue working together.

PRINCIPLES OF STAFF DEVELOPMENT

As we began to do our work in the country, we realized that the principles of staff development that guide our work in America also apply to Bhutan. One of the most important principles of effective professional develop-

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A monk lights incense during a traditional Marchang ceremony at Wangduechoeling Lower Secondary School in Bumthang, Bhutan. The ceremony at the beginning of the teacher workshop is to secure blessings and remove obstacles for a successful outcome.

ment, engaging the learner, was critical for Bhutanese educators. Similar to their American counterparts, Bhutan's teachers and administrators enjoyed hands-on learning strategies that encouraged active participation and the opportunity to dialogue with each other (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001). It was particularly important for us to engage the Bhutanese in active learning for several reasons. Initially, teachers and administrators were reluctant to ask questions. In Bhutan, we were considered the "experts from the U.S." Consequently, there

was a cultural value placed on maintaining a certain level of reservation and quiet respect. The Bhutanese did not feel comfortable challenging the "experts," and their willingness to speak out publicly in a large group was limited. However, when we changed the workshop format to include activities that fostered interaction and small-group discussion, the level of participation changed dramatically. The strategies we modeled in learning sessions were techniques for teachers to incorporate into future lessons to engage and reach all learners. The favorite culminating activity introduced by our team was the "aha" strategy. The activity required participants to write a significant summary point that resonated with them and then to

share their "aha" with at least five others. Audience members had an opportunity to get up and move, reflect upon their own learning, and discuss important points with their colleagues. We became the "aha" professionals from America.

Additional principles of adult learning common to both cultures included the need to make connections and practice new learning (Loucks-Horsley, Hewson, Love, & Stiles, 1998). Overall, the Bhutanese educators needed to know why presenters were highlighting certain information and were generally

more enthusiastic when facilitators made connections explicit. Most workshop participants retained and applied new learning when they were provided opportunities to see strategies modeled, followed by time to practice in small groups (Mitchell, Hoyle, & Martin, 1993). The Bhutanese educators responded very positively when we did a simulation of a testing session and then gave them time to test each other using a learning disabilities screening tool. Providing ample opportunities for Bhutanese educators to process, reflect, and question enabled them to integrate new information, assimilate it, and see the relevance to their work.

As professional developers, we were delighted that certain principles of effective professional development worked successfully with participants from diverse backgrounds. However, the differences we encountered in our work in Bhutan challenged us professionally. We quickly learned that we needed to revise and adapt our styles to be culturally responsive. We came to realize that, in Bhutan, we were both teachers and learners. The overall experience encouraged us to be reflective in our work, resulting in tremendous growth professionally and personally.

UNIQUENESS OF THE AUDIENCE

The Bhutanese audience was quite different from the typical American audience. English is their language of instruction and Dzongkha (of Tibetan origin) is their national language, with many other dialects spoken throughout the country. Therefore, as presenters, we needed to be conscious of presenting information to English language learners incorporating familiar, basic vocabulary. More often than we had initially anticipated, we needed to scaffold the information and use visuals to present difficult concepts. For example, during the keynote address and other PowerPoint presentations, we used images and universal symbols to highlight key points. Pairing the visual with the oral presentation seemed to enhance meaning and drive home major concepts. In addition, the audience needed information presented in a sequential manner with extra time to process and reflect. Repetition of key ideas was essential to understanding. We quickly recognized that we prepared much more material than we were able to address in the time allotted, and we often needed to abandon our original plans. Flexibility was key, and we had to abandon the notion that more was better. Over time, we began to acknowledge that the workshops were not designed solely to impart our professional agenda, but rather to know our audience and empower them to make changes that would benefit their special education children. Throughout the workshops, we shared how we adapted our materials and presentation to meet participants' needs. As a result, teachers left the workshop more confident in their abilities to be flexible and adapt their curriculum to accommodate students with a range of abilities.

The role of ritual and tradition took on a different meaning in Bhutan. Before most workshops, there was an opening religious "Marchang" ceremony at which monks would light

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Educators in Bhutan involved with the 2010 training in Thimphu, Bhutan, include (front row, from left) Kristin Berman, Alison Telsey, Laurie Levine, Chimi Lhamo, Kim McCormack, and (back row, from left), Jigme Dorji, Sangay Lhamo, and Yoten (no second name).



Teachers and administrators attend a professional development workshop in Bhutan. Initially, participants were reluctant to ask questions.

incense, make offerings, and recite Buddhist prayers to welcome participants. Following this ceremony, high-ranking government and educational leaders gave opening speeches. As Americans, we didn't understand the need to spend so much time on ceremonies because it conflicted with our goal-oriented, time-efficient American values. Although we never fully comprehended the ceremonies' symbolic importance, the longer we were in Bhutan, the more we began to acknowledge and respect their importance to the Bhutanese. The experience provided us an opportunity to recognize that people are not one-dimensional. As professional developers from a different culture, we needed to integrate the nonprofessional and professional self to encourage buy-in by our participants and to create trusting relationships. When we embraced Bhutanese traditions, the audience became more comfortable and communicative. As a consequence of our acceptance and appreciation of their ceremonies, the Bhutanese felt valued, and we were able to mobilize their hearts and minds to enhance learning (Wheatley & Frieze, 2011).

FORGING RELATIONSHIPS

An additional cultural difference was the bonding and friendship among school personnel. In Bhutan, the team of teachers and administrators traveled together to the workshop and stayed in a guest house. They slept five to six in a room, brought cooking supplies from home to cook communal meals for the three days, and spent free time visiting important ritual

sites. They used the conference as an opportunity to fortify relationships to work better as teams and support each other in their work at the schools. All of their future action plans included mandatory turnkey training so that teachers who did not attend the workshops would learn from their peers. The Bhutanese workshop participants were engaged in a learning community, and therefore were in a good position to bring positive change to their schools. By contrast, it has been our experience in the U.S. that principals do not usually accompany teachers attending workshops or conferences. Teachers from the U.S. often feel frustrated because their administrators are not hearing the same information, resulting in a lack of leadership to support future change. It was an important reminder that we need to be more proactive in the U.S. in assuring that administrators and faculty attend workshops together to ensure positive outcomes for students.

WHAT WE LEARNED AND HOW WE CHANGED

After spending the summer training teachers in a vastly different and unique culture, we asked ourselves, "What were the lessons we learned to make us more effective professional

Continued on p. 45

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interact with others and organize around their strengths. They allow people the freedom to take on new challenges and projects they feel passionate about. They also give people from all over their school the chance to interact with others they might otherwise never talk to, creating the potential for new sparks of innovation in every interaction. These leaders are finding that people can often self-organize into more highly productive relationships with a greater sense of commitment to outcomes than the work teams they try to orchestrate.

Forces within and beyond our schools are creating expectations for transformation to encourage 21st-century learners. To meet such expectations, we first need to create the conditions that compel professionals to become 21st-century learners themselves. Aligning our thinking about professional learning to create an understanding of forces that are changing our daily lives will help schools foster innovation as well as improvement.

Continued from p. 41

developers?" In many ways, the experience reinforced what we already knew about best practices in staff development. Knowing your audience, incorporating hands-on activities that engage the adult learner, using modeling and coaching, and translating theory into practice will continue to be critical elements in our work with all educators. As part of our professional growth, we also gained an understanding of being culturally responsive. It is not enough to be aware of cultural differences; we need to embrace those differences to become change agents. In Bhutan, it was incumbent upon us to facilitate the process of "Bhutanizing" American special education practices and processes. We recognized the importance of planning with the input of key stakeholders as well as the need for trust and buy-in from key decision makers. We also affirmed that, as staff developers, we could provide valuable technical assistance and information. Ultimately, however, we must assist any audience to adapt these concepts to their own cultural context. Throughout our experience, we reinforced our belief that cultural differences exist in all environments; they are not exclusive to different countries. They reveal themselves school to school and classroom to classroom.

What we learned professionally was important; however, the experience also changed us personally. Like their American counterparts, Bhutanese teachers are passionate about and dedicated to their craft. However, the Bhutanese teachers we worked with had an inner peacefulness and calm that we often do not see in America. We left Bhutan with a renewed commitment to re-establish balance in our own lives. Given our fast-paced American society and our multifaceted roles in life, we need to remember to slow down. By listening more effectively and being more present in the moment, we believe we will be more sensitive to our audiences' needs, more focused in

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Lessons from Bhutan

our presentations, and overall, more effective staff developers.

In this age of Race to the Top accountability, we want to share this thought from the Bhutanese Minister of Education: As a nation, we need to have high expectations for all children, but we should never forget the soul of the child. For the four professional development specialists from the U.S., this was our "aha" moment.

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