

International Collaboration for In-service: The Bhutanese Multigrade Attachment Program

Abstract

The Bhutanese Multigrade Attachment Program has developed through a collaboration between a number of agencies and institutions in Australia and Bhutan. The collaboration, between funding bodies, the Education Division in Bhutan, the University of New England (UNE) and school Communities around Armidale, features a shared knowledge of what is needed, an approach that does not privilege one partner over another and processes which focus on mutual understanding. It depends upon trust within continuing relationships, and hard work from those involved. The Program has developed considerably and it is evident that there have been a range of positive inservice and cultural outcomes for those involved in Bhutan and in Australia. Some difficulties are also identified.

Introduction

A delegation of Bhutanese education officials visited UNE in 1992. They were seeking a partner for the development of teachers' skills in multigrade teaching (see below). UNE was one of the universities visited because a former member of UNE staff was working for UNICEF in Thimpu, the capital of Bhutan. He was aware of the availability of expertise of this kind at UNE and in the small schools in the rural and remote settings in the district surrounding Armidale where multigrade teaching was the norm. The interest in multigrade was because:

- (1) the Bhutanese had been establishing schools in rural and remote areas at that time, and
- (2) there was a short supply of trained teachers throughout Bhutan (Yangzom 1994).

The multigrade approach to teaching was seen by the education officials in Bhutan as a way forward for the new small schools of the Bhutanese education system. In this paper I portray the development and impact of an international collaboration for in-service that developed to fulfil these teachers' need for multigrade skills. "Multigrade" here is referred to as the

situation in which children of at least a two year age range are taught in the same classroom (Lloyd 1997; 1999). I also draw out implications for collaborations of this kind

Background

It is important to recognise at this point that Bhutan's education system is relatively new. Its systemic secular education really began in the 1950s (Bray 1996). Compared to Western traditions, the teaching service is relatively poorly trained and educated (Laird, Maxwell, Tenzin & Jamtsho 1999). An In-service Education for Teachers (INSET) system has been established so that local pre-service training can be supplemented by annual training camps. By the mid to late 1990s the curricula of the primary schools have been adapted to the Bhutanese context though this had been partially achieved for secondary schools. Previously there had been a period of strong syllabus and examination control from India (Thinley 1999). Secular education, being relatively new and now well accepted by parents (Dorji 2001), created considerable pressure upon the system for student places and infrastructure.

The demands for education is evident in rural and remote Bhutan as well as in the towns, but the context of schooling in rural and remote Bhutan is quite challenging. The walk for teachers to remote schools from the nearest "road head" to the school can take from a half to several days or more. Teachers often work with large class sizes (classes greater than 40 are common) in small spaces, usually without many physical resources such as paper and reproduction equipment. Schools in rural and remote regions largely carry on without electricity, though the number of sites with solar panels for electricity is increasing. If the children do not board at the school or nearby then they walk several hours to get to school each day. In Bhutan this usually means walking across rugged mountainous terrain. This can be particularly demanding in the rainy season. There are many local languages but the national language is Dzongkha and the medium of instruction is English. A majority of Bhutanese are Buddhist but there is a large minority of Hindus, of Nepalese extraction, who mainly live in the southern foothills of the Himalayas. There are many cultural differences between those who visit Australia and their hosts.

Developing collaboration

There were several partners in collaboration in this Program. The relationship between the partners has developed over time as the Program itself slowly evolved within broad parameters.

Establishing the Program: Major partners

Major collaborators include funding agencies, the Education Division of Bhutan, UNE and school communities in north-west NSW. Bhutan is a poor country and so Bhutanese education officials need to find funding from sources other than from their own government. This illustrates the first and most basic level of collaboration that a program such as this one demands and it has clearly been an important feature. In this program financial partners in collaboration have not been numerous. Recently the Second Education Project donors and AusAid, the latter through UNICEF Australia, have been the major partners on the funding side. Staff at UNE have been crucial. They developed a model which allowed experienced teachers from Bhutan to observe multigrade and other forms of teaching first hand in schools within reasonably easy travelling distance from UNE. Blocks of two placements over six weeks were supplemented by workshops at UNE which drew out implications and which talked through observations. This central focus of multigrade work by Australian teachers in schools with Bhutanese teachers has remained throughout and so the teachers of schools around Armidale are also major partners in the collaboration. Furthermore, there is an important cultural objective built into the program. Parents in the school community are also partners. Without these folk welcoming Bhutanese teachers into their homes for up to three weeks the program could not be sustained, both culturally and financially.

Consolidation of the Program

The initial delegation of Bhutanese visitors to UNE established personal links with members of UNE staff that have been ongoing from 1992. Thus, over time, trust has been established between officers of the Royal Government of Bhutan Division of Education and several members of UNE academic and administrative staff. One important outcome of the developing relationships has been the visits to rural and remote schools in Bhutan by key UNE academic staff. Such visits are demanding on extremely busy Bhutanese

officials since travel in Bhutan takes considerable time and is also demanding of scarce resources. An important feature of these visits has been the knowledge of the Bhutanese rural and remote teachers' situations gained by UNE staff over several visits. A tangible outcome has been the development of a video entitled "Glimpses of Bhutan" which is used to show Australian host school communities something of the life and people in Bhutan and especially of schools.

As well as this deepening knowledge of the Bhutanese schools and education system, cultural awareness of Bhutan and its people have also been developed. This knowledge is very important to assist host school communities to understand cultural differences and to establish a basis of understanding and respect for Bhutanese guests when they visit school communities. Each year up to 16 school communities are involved in the introductory day, and the first and second placements. The numbers of Bhutanese participants doubled in 1998 from six to twelve.

Recent collaborations/developments

The program has always had educational and cultural objectives and each year the program is modified with its improvement in mind. For example, (a) an in-service day has been added in which members of the host school communities are brought into UNE for a day, at which time the program objectives are explained and cultural sensitivities are discussed. (b) More recently still, UNICEF Australia staff have acted as hosts to the teachers in a visit to schools and sites in Sydney, just prior to their return to Bhutan.

In-service objectives do dominate, however. For instance, (c) there is an attempt to match the schools from which the Bhutanese teachers come with the type of school in which they are placed in Australia. Thus such information is needed prior to the commencement of the program. The information is readily supplied by the Division of Education in Bhutan from their records and is a window into the collaboration that exists within the Education Division to select the participants. (d) More recently teachers have reported on ideas that they have adopted or adapted in schools in Bhutan. The reporting process was first suggested in 1998 and was readily accepted by Bhutanese officials. In this way pressure is exerted on participants; they

submit the report through the Bhutanese Education Division to UNE for a response. Thus the period of in-service is extended in two senses: in time by several months and also into the situation of the participants' own schools. (e) In the last twelve months, the School of Education studies at UNE has created a website for the benefit of host school communities and others (see <<http://fehps.une.edu.au/f/d/edu/Bhutan%20site/home.html>>). At the website details about the Program are available as well as information about Bhutan and education in Bhutan, photographs of Bhutan and cultural information such as recipes of typical Bhutanese food. This UNE website is linked to the UNICEF Australia website which features UNE's Multigrade Attachment Program (see <http://203.147.200.93/kidsrights/bhutan_projects.htm>).

Annual collaboration process

This process is best considered as having three phases. The **first phase** of the collaboration each year begins with the negotiation of specific dates for the attachment of Bhutanese teachers in Australia between UNE staff and Bhutan's Education Division. This process has been greatly facilitated in the past year with the introduction of email in Thimpu. These dates are important since some arrangements have to be made early in Armidale such as bus and accommodation bookings. Also, requests have to be made of schools around Armidale and so the local District Supervisor of Schools' imprimatur is needed. Australian schools also liaise with parents since a crucial ingredient to the schools' participation is the ability for each participating school to house two Bhutanese teachers. Our experience has been that obtaining billets is a limiting factor for schools. It represents the main reason why the program has not been expanded further, though several requests have been made to do so in recent years. Contact is made with UNICEF Australia staff to ensure their participation in, for example, arranging health cover and the short educational and cultural program in Sydney over the last few days. The budget is developed at UNE and submitted to the Division of Education. The teaching team from the Faculty is organised. There are academic and administrative staff at UNE who now know the program so well that the process swings into operation reasonably smoothly. In this planning phase then there is considerable collaboration

within UNE, and between UNE staff and the Education Division in Bhutan, and UNICEF Australia about the details that make the program work well.

The **second phase** is the six weeks that the Bhutanese teachers spend in Australia. Some important principles and values embedded in the program include the following:

1. The deficit model (Gale & Densmore 2000, p.12) of development is not used in UNE workshops. It is also discouraged at the host school community in-service held at UNE. This refers to both educational (professional development) and cultural matters. Bhutanese teachers are encouraged to take control of their own learning by identifying what their interests are, and also by thinking about the needs of their school and system. We do not presume to know what is best for the Bhutanese but provide opportunities for learning within the arena of multigrade teaching, and beyond. Considerable power is retained by the Bhutanese, Here we are attempting a post-colonial approach to development. There is an expectation of active collaboration in the specific nature of the in-service within the general arena of multigrade teaching. However, this is sometimes difficult for the Bhutanese teachers to come to terms with since they are schooled in the "vessel filling", or Friere's banking concept, of learning.
2. Similarly the materialism and other drawbacks of Australian culture are pointed out early in the workshop environment at UNE. From experience, we are aware that the comforts and advantages of living can camouflage the many disadvantages not so apparent in a short stay in a relatively rich, western environment. There is quite a variation in response by the Bhutanese to their cultural experiences.
3. There is a focus upon practice and materials supporting multigrade practice (Fullan 1991). Bhutanese teachers take back with them practices and materials from their collaboration with the Australian counterparts. What might work in the reality of a Bhutanese rural or remote school provides a clear focus for activities in Australia and most time is given to this through a focus on ideas to adopt and adapt back in Bhutanese school situations.

4. The Bhutanese work in pairs so that each person has at least one other from Bhutan with whom they can share immediate experiences, in their own language. This is important for both educational and cultural objectives in the program.
5. The broad learning model of this phase is reflection upon experience. Thus, after the introductory visit day to Armidale schools, the experiences are unpacked, typically by identifying similarities and differences between Bhutanese and Australian schools. Similarly, after each placement, experiences are reflected upon so as to draw out meanings by sharing them between the Bhutanese themselves, mostly using the group work practices that they will have seen in schools but not have directly experienced before.
6. Within the broad framework of 4. above, Bhutanese teachers are encouraged to keep professional diaries so that they can learn by documenting their experiences. They use these diary records as the basis for the end of attachment report based on both placements. Individual reports are collated and, together with some text about the attachment program, constitute the Attachment Report. As they leave for Bhutan, participants take back a record of their involvement, and the involvement of their colleagues. This requires considerable liaison between the teaching and administrative staff at the School of Education Studies, UNE to get the Attachment Report completed in time.
7. Consistent with 4., the more demanding action research model of Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) is presented toward the end of the program. This is so that the teachers have a process to follow which will enable them to trial the ten or so ideas that they adopt or adapt from Australia (mentioned in (d) in the previous section). Our experience over four years of adopting this approach is that between two and six ideas are trialled once back in Bhutan. Furthermore, the Bhutanese teachers can use the action research process for any subsequent professional development.

8. The cultural dimension is important and is not left entirely to chance. In relation to this last point, the Bhutanese are welcomed formally by the Dean. They are also informally welcomed on their arrival by Bhutanese post graduate students studying at UNE and the experience of these postgrads of Australia is very useful for the multigrade participants. Social events are arranged early in the program which the Bhutanese (Program participants and post grads) attend along with the UNE personnel. Always a high point, the two day visit to Coffs Harbour is arranged and lead by UNE staff. Furthermore, schools are encouraged to involve the Bhutanese in every-day events around their school and community such as football on Saturday afternoon and visits to the local shops. A final dinner is also used as a farewell by those directly involved in the program that year.
9. Finally, and most importantly, there is considerable collaboration between Bhutanese and Australian teachers. Australian teachers respond to the needs of their Bhutanese colleagues and Australian teachers and community members learn about Bhutan, its people and customs, and its education system.

The **third phase** revolves around reporting. Soon after the completion of the six weeks in Australia, the Attachment Report (see 6. above) is circulated to key partners, ie, the Education Division in Bhutan with additional copies for local representatives of funding agencies in Bhutan, and UNICEF Australia. As has been outlined in the previous section (in (d)) and above (7.), there is a second report that is developed from trials of ideas in Bhutan. This report is largely a collation of the action research reports by the Bhutanese participants themselves. The compilation of this report requires considerable collaboration between members of academic and administrative staff at UNE. Copies of this report are distributed to the participants (together with Faculty certificates marking their completion of the program), as well as to key partners.

Main outcomes for collaborators

Indications are that outcomes of this Program are very positive as far as the main collaborators are concerned (Maxwell & Laird. 2001). We found that the

in-service and cultural aims of the Program were well understood by collaborators. However, within the broad aims of the study, it is evident from data analysed so far that the Bhutanese participants and their Australian hosts perceive quite different benefits from their participation.

More central to Australian school communities is the cultural understanding that ensues (of the 'other' and their own), though some appear not to have taken advantage of this and merely see the Program as an exotic addition to the school program (Maxwell & Laird 2001, p. 18).

For the Bhutanese the professional development opportunities are central and there is almost unanimous agreement that the program assists them. In some situations, the Bhutanese have been challenged by their Australian experiences and the first-hand knowledge gained of a Western culture is one that they readily identify informally as another key outcome. They are openly appreciative of Australian hospitality. In this context, cultural similarities are important such as sense of humour and our more relaxed style of doing things. It is possible that Armidale being a small, country city and the program being situated in rural New England are also contributing factors since, in some ways at least, there are similarities here with the Bhutanese context.

Other partners are also positive about the Program, by inference at least. The Education Division of the Royal Government of Bhutan expresses its confidence in the Program by continuing it, and by requests for increased numbers of participants. Funding agencies similarly continue to support the Program. Indeed, "UNICEF Thimpu and UNICEF Australia have collectively ranked the Program since 1995/6 as either 'best practice' or 'fully satisfactory' (the two highest indicators out of five) in annual project completion reports" (McGregor 2001).

Despite increasing workloads in the university sector, staff at UNE have continued to support the program. The reason for this is that the Program is worth doing because the outcomes for the Bhutanese are evident, it provides potential opportunities for research and consultancies. Furthermore, other developments have eventuated including success for a number of Bhutanese

postgrads and recent discussions indicate that the model of development described here may be extended between UNE and educators in Bhutan to other areas of in-service.

Conclusions

Collaborators perceive the Bhutanese Multigrade Attachment Program quite positively. I have portrayed in this paper the central role of collaboration in its success.

There are several principles and issues that can be drawn out of this case study of international collaboration in in-service education. The trust that has developed between staff in UNE in Australia and the Bhutanese Education Division is very important. This trust has emerged from a relationship that has allowed knowledge and understanding about each other's education systems and cultures to grow over time.

We think that an attitude that does not privilege Australian culture or educational practices is an important one for Bhutanese people as they continue on their remarkable progress of modernising their educational system. The notion of participants identifying what they need to know, prioritising, and then applying ideas back in Bhutan is characteristic of our approach. Certainly this does not come easily to some of the participants.

There have been changes to improve the Program. Incorporating changes requires collaboration amongst the several partners and a certain flexibility in the relationship. The shared understanding of the nature of the Program by the partners as well as their ability to go beyond a 9 to 5 approach to their work greatly assists the smooth running of the Program. Details have to be ironed out and deadlines have to be achieved, and because three main agencies are involved in three different cities across two cultures, collaboration is a cornerstone to achieving the aims of the Program. Finally, there is a strong commitment to the success of the Program by the partners clearly exemplified a number of key staff at UNE over a number of years.

This is a cross-cultural collaboration. The Program allows the celebration of diversity and a contribution to cross-cultural understanding but it is no

surprise that school communities will react differently to these opportunities, as no doubt do the Bhutanese.

As identified earlier, cultural or in-service deficit models are *not* part of this Program. Greater power on the ground rests with the Australian partners in the relationship but this power is acknowledged and understood but actively minimised by the UNE partners. Additional key elements of the in-service model used in the Bhutanese Multigrade Attachment Program include a focus upon practice and materials to support practice, learning in pairs and collegial support, the experience and understanding of collaborating Australian teachers and opportunities (and associated pressure) to try out ideas. These professional experiences are wrapped up in a program that is a once-in-a-lifetime experience for the Bhutanese participants.

Acknowledgement

The assistance of Ms Jenny Reid in the preparation of this article is appreciated.

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