



Our Work in Bhutan

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Inspired by AMI and EsF

The origins of our work in Bhutan emerged from a holiday in 2000 spent trekking from Paro to Thimphu, the country's capital. While there, I came across the sign of The Little Dragon School, a Montessori school, which naturally prompted curiosity and the desire for an observation. After a short visit it became clear this school may need some help from time to time, so I left my card urging the school to contact me if they ever wanted some support.

Two years later, the new owner Aum Yeden emailed me, which started a fruitful dialogue which continues today. As it turns out, Aum Yeden was trained by Mr Abs Joosten around the same time as I ... contemporary Montessorians, this was an auspicious beginning. In her desire to improve the standard of the school, Aum Yeden was interested in sending her teachers to our inaugural "Assistants to the Classroom" course here in Australia. I considered as how that kind of cost would be horrific so suggested instead that we bring the course to her under the auspices of Educateurs sans Frontieres.

It was unfortunate that our trainer in training, Pamela Nunn was unable to join us, however, after a few delays, Andrea O'Halloran, birth to three trained, and I , 3 to 6 trained, settled on our September holidays to venture forth to lay the foundations of the Assistant's course which we called "Introduction to Montessori Theory and Practice".

Bhutan is a most pristine, wondrously beautiful country, nestled in the Himalayan Mountains west of Nepal and Sikkim, north of Bangladesh and south of Tibet. It is a third world country with a happy demeanour. People have housing and ample food. The government provides free health care and education to all from five years old. Education, based on the Indian/British system, is conducted in English however each school has a Dzongkha teacher to insure the language and culture are kept alive. The national dress, kira for women and go for men, is required for work and school, decreed by the King. The King, adored by his people, was always referred to as "our" King and is adamant their culture and heritage is protected.

Tourism is restricted to 5000 people a year (up from 200), which brings in a certain amount of revenue due to the hefty per diem surcharge. Hydroelectric power is the only other principle income for this basically agrarian culture.

We did however find some challenges facing this delightful country whose mantra is "Gross National Happiness". The introduction of television in 2000 has compromised the culture to some extent. As well, increase in health care has created a burgeoning population of children and the government can't keep up with the demand for places in school. This has prompted a growth in private education and therefore competition for placement. In addition, people from the rural sector are wanting to come to the cities for better paying jobs which has only just started to create problems.

Our host, the Little Dragon School, is situated in the capital, Thimphu. The compound comprises the main house with a residence upstairs and 4 small classrooms underneath. There is a separate building with 4 smallish classrooms and veranda. The grounds have ample space with lots of potential for outside activities. This school and the school in Paro (the only airport in the country) are Montessori in approach however none of the teachers are Montessori trained.

Our two-week introductory course ran every day for two hours after the school day ended. We followed the "Children's House Assistants to the Classroom" AMI curriculum, laying the foundation of theory and practice for Part 2 next year when Pam Nunn, our trainer, will complete the course. The routine was comprised of observations, visits to schools, material making, resourcing materials (this was fun), course preparation and of course the lectures.

We had 24 teachers from five private schools attend the course. These were made up of two fully trained traditional teachers and one partially trained. It is not a requirement in Early Childhood to be trained in Bhutan. Two schools had some Montessori material and knowledge, the remaining three schools were traditional primary schools. The teachers particularly wanted practical demonstrations of materials; however we explained we had to precede this with theory, so they would understand WHY we were doing what we do. Our emphasis was on understanding the child.

The volume of material covered was a bit overwhelming at first for our teachers, however we had many handouts to assist in taking in the onslaught of information. On the other hand the teachers were impressive with their quick grasp of the theory and their commitment to the course. This was most obvious with their insightful recapitulation of the reading assignments shared each day with the group.

Our focus was to guide these teachers to an understanding of the development of the child and to empower them to put into practicing the concepts around the prepared environment, cleanliness, order, completeness, accessibility of the equipment with special emphasis on grace and courtesy. We had success. Changes were made in their classrooms which had follow-on in the home. Our teachers' attitude towards the 'naughty' child changed to 'how can I meet his needs'.

We had a terrific opportunity when a meeting was arranged with the Director and Coordinator of the Ministry of Education. The Director made two important comments. Firstly, he thought Montessori was a kindergarden, so we clarified how we have well established schools from birth up through the Edrkinder and explained about the four planes of development. Then he asked about the goals of Montessori. We explained the goals of independence, self-reliance and a joy of learning. A smile spread across his face and he said: "That's what our King wants, independence and self-reliance." As a result, the Director asked us to speak at the National Institute of Education which we have set up for our trip next year. In particular, we assured him this was not a one-off course, but we would continue supporting Montessori education in Bhutan as long as it was wanted.

We were honoured on the last day of lectures with a visit from the Director of Education, which precipitated media coverage. Great for country-wide visibility for Montessori! Our lovely teachers gave us a memorable send off with the traditional Bhutanese custom of offering the Tara (is this the correct word, I have forgotten?), a long white scarf, and with much singing and dancing.

We leave you with the request from the two Montessori schools for trained teachers to come to Bhutan, teach in the schools and continue to guide the teachers towards excellence in education.

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