

# Compassion in the Bhutanese Gross National Happiness (GNH) Infused Classrooms

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## **Abstract**

There is a growing interest in research on the role of compassion in the fields of positive psychology and social psychology. Compassion in the educational setting is focused on well-being and relationship-based approaches to support students to flourish academically, emotionally and socially. This paper is a review of compassion in the literature and provides a foreground of future research on compassion in the Bhutanese classroom. It also presents a discussion on compassion in relation to benefits for self and others, compassion fatigue and self-compassion. More importantly, this paper provides a deeper understanding of the role of compassion in education in building the teaching-learning process and foregrounds the need for further investigation into compassionate teaching and learning for a range of school-based curriculum subjects.

**Key Words:** *compassion fatigue, self-compassion, well-being, education.*

## **Introduction**

Compassion is one of the core values of Bhutan's developmental philosophy called 'Gross National Happiness'. It is a concept that is deeply rooted in Bhutanese society and a fundamental principle of Buddhism. In fact, the cultivation of compassion into Bhutanese society as a Buddhist nation has stemmed from the ancient wisdom of Bhutan's historic legal code of 1629 (The GNH Centre Bhutan, 2019) which was established by Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal. Most importantly, the constitution of Bhutan (article 9: Section 20) emphasises the need to create a compassionate society. It reads:

The State shall strive to create conditions that will enable the true and sustainable development of a good and compassionate society rooted in Buddhist ethos and universal human values. (Government of Bhutan, 2008, p. 20)

The extent to which Bhutan's aspiration to become a compassionate society will depend on the knowledge, capability and character of its citizens. This requires a system of education that empowers citizens to become compassionate (Zangley Dukpa, 2016). This paper, therefore, provides an outline of the construct 'Compassion' from a range of literature to provide a deeper understanding of this concept and its relevance in the educational setting.

Inspired by the UNESCO's vision-mission of "Peace for Development and Development for Peace", a non-profit organisation called Asia Pacific Network for International Education and Values Education (APNIEVE) was created as a follow-up to the 44<sup>th</sup> Session of the ICE (International Conference on Education in Geneva, in October 1994) (UNESCO, 1998). The purpose is to promote and develop international education and values education for peace, human rights, democracy, and sustainable development through networking and cooperation among individuals, groups and institutions working on these fields in the Asia Pacific and the rest of the world (UNESCO, 1998).

UNESCO-APNIEVE emphasises the importance of living together through caring for each other and sharing. It stresses quality relationships at all levels through the integration of contemporary and traditional humanistic values in education in the development of the whole person. In view of the vision of UNESCO-APNIEVE, it is critical that in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, education has a fundamental role to play in personal and social development. Achieving this vision will require participatory teaching and learning methods that focus on the values, attitudes and behaviours that enable individuals to live together harmoniously and make decisions in a collaborative way. In 2010, the Ministry of Education of Bhutan implemented 'Educating for Gross National Happiness' (EGNH) programme with

the aim of infusing GNH values into the teachers and students of Bhutan and create GNH inspired classroom. Discussing the importance of integrating values into the education system, the Ministry of Education of Bhutan (2014) stresses:

There is a need to scale up support to schools in integrating values in curricular and extracurricular contexts in the development of student responsibility, social skills, resilience and well-being. This will help in personal development of students through the inculcating values and well-being in education. It is a common belief that character is the most 'precious gift of education' that is essentially shaped and built through values education (p.84).

The focus on EGNH in schools is both on pedagogy and curriculum as well as extra-curricular programmes (Kezang Sherab, Maxwell & Cooksey, 2016). The role of pedagogical practices in developing enabling social environments that have the strongest influence on students' cognitive and emotional engagements is essential for students' deeper learning (Pietarinen, Soini & Pyhalto, 2014). Such positive social learning environments allow learners to flourish by feeling safe, secure and valued to participate in classroom activities with increased well-being (O'Brien & Blue, 2017).

Discussing the importance of creating an enabling social environment for learners, Hart (2004) posits the view of a compassionate classroom as a non-threatening environment where students feel they belong by sharing ideas and opinions and interacting in social and intellectual ways without fear. This kind of classroom is founded on the principle of a quality relationship that exists between the teacher and students. Compassion is at the heart of this quality relationship (Day, 2004).

Teachers have an important role to play in nurturing a quality relationship with students (Boorn et al. 2010) and the quality of what teachers know and can do, and how they do it, has the greatest impact on student learning (Fitzgerald & Smith, 2016). The compassionate teacher develops a true understanding of the

students (Choden, 2003; Miller, 1981). The genuine feeling is associated with concern for students' suffering and, as such, desires to enhance students' welfare and well-being are developed by building positive relationships (Bankard, 2015).

The positive relationship establishes conditions for optimal learning by fostering an environment of safety, trust and respect (Kauffman, 2013). The caring attitude of the teacher nourishes an emotionally safe learning environment by building trust and respect. This kind of learning environment safely opens students' hearts and minds to learning and growth where academic excellence thrives (Feldman, 2006; Glaser, 2005; Weaver & Wilding, 2013).

The following section of the paper starts with the definitions of compassion from various perspectives. This is followed by the benefits of compassion particularly in relation to the teaching-learning process. Finally, the paper provides recommendations for the way forward for cultivating compassion into Bhutanese classrooms.

### **What is compassion?**

The value of compassion is recognised in many parts of society. Most of the world's religious traditions place compassion, as a humanistic value, at the centre of their belief systems. International professional bodies in healthcare, education and the justice system also accentuate the importance of compassion, drawing on similar understandings of the term in relation to an emotional response (Strauss et al., 2016). Scholars from a variety of disciplines including nursing and education have shown an interest in compassion research that has led to a dramatic increase in research focused on compassion over the last decade.

The word 'compassion' comes from the Latin 'compati', meaning 'to suffer with' (Gilbert, 2015). Compassion is a fundamental tenet of Buddhist philosophy and Buddhist perspectives on compassion have been given greater prominence in the psychology literature (Strauss et al., 2016). Compassion in the Buddhist sense means a motivation to take responsibility to alleviate the suffering of others (Dalai

Lama, 1995; Dorje, 2011; Tshering, 2008) and is associated with a sense of commitment and connectedness to reach out to others (Dalai Lama & Cutler, 1998).

Compassion is known by the term 'Karuna' in Sanskrit (Augustine & Wayne, 2019), and 'Nyinjay' in Dzongkha (Dorji Wangchuk, 2018) which is generally understood as a wish for all living beings to be free from suffering and the causes of suffering. According to His Holiness the Dalai Lama (2003) compassion is the wish for another being to be free from suffering. It is a wish for the well-being of another. Compassion is also referred to as a feeling of concern that arises in oneself when confronted with the suffering of others, generating a feeling of motivation to relieve that suffering (Keltner & Goetz, 2007; Kimble & Bamforde-Wade, 2013). Furthermore, compassion is also described as an inner resource to connect with others (Tierney et al., 2017; Von Dietze & Orb, 2000).

Other definitions of compassion have broad agreement with a multiset of components that is comprised of a combination of cognitive, affective and motivational components (Gilbert, 2015; Goetz et al., 2010; Jazaieri, 2018; Lazarus, 1991; Lilius et al., 2011; Strauss et al., 2016). The cognitive dimension relates to noticing the suffering of others. The affective component is the empathetic concern related to being emotionally moved by others' suffering. The motivational dimension is described by the responsiveness or readiness to ease others' suffering. Thus, the term compassion refers to the ability to notice or witness the suffering of others, that motivates a subsequent desire to help or act. Noticing involves awareness and consciousness. This insight is confirmed by the words of Miller (1981), who states "compassion is a state of consciousness in which benevolence is primary and where a state of grace is established within ourselves" (p. 14).

Compassion involves not just alleviating others' immediate suffering but also to prevent future suffering in order to thrive and flourish (Gilbert, 2015). The term 'suffering' refers to a wide range of unpleasant subjective experiences and

emotions including: emotional pain; psychological distress; hardship; and, existential anguish (Driver, 2007). The complex multidimensional construct of compassion reveals that compassion is basically a caring motive that requires competencies like: awareness; intention; empathy; sympathy; generosity; openness; courage; distress tolerance; persistence; and, commitment to release the sufferings of others (Castano, 2012; Choden, 2003; Dalai Lama, 2003; Strauss et al., 2016).

### **Benefits of compassion**

A good number of studies have shown that compassionate people experience a wide range of positive emotions themselves, including love, joy, gratitude, hope, warm-heartedness, lower stress, and less worry (Fredrickson et al., 2008; Jazaieri et al., 2013). These positive emotions and effects are linked to an increase in a variety of inner resources including mindfulness, healthy relationships with others, and self-acceptance. These findings indicate that compassion is an extremely valuable and indeed necessary skill for teachers, to foster healthy relationships, and to be able to observe and, act on ameliorating students' needs (broadly 'suffering', but in an educational context the learning students need to engage with), and to create a classroom environment that will be more conducive for students' learning. Unless the teachers feel what their student is going through, it is difficult to connect and understand students' needs (Hanson & Mendius, 2009). Similarly, a study carried out by a Bhutanese teacher educator, Sonam Rinchen (2014) revealed that it is imperative for the teachers to acquire skills to understand the emotions experienced by the students in order to create a positive emotional classroom, conducive for students' learning.

Teaching is a profession that presents many opportunities for the teacher to practice, teach and model compassion (Albrecht, 2018; Kernochan et al., 2016). Compassion can be integrated while teaching and interacting with the students. For example, when the teacher engages in compassionate listening, students feel heard, validated, and understood. Compassionate listening implies listening to

students with the capacity to acknowledge their sufferings (Kimble & Bamforde-Wade, 2013). It is a way of hearing in which the teacher is fully present with what is happening in the moment without trying to control or judge (Jambay Lhamo, 2018; Kimble & Bamforde-Wade, 2013). Jazaieri (2018) describes compassionate listening as listening with undivided attention and without interruptions. Compassionate listening is at the heart of every communication and helps the teacher to connect and develop a positive relationship with the students (Kimble & Bamforde-Wade, 2013; Pianta et al., 2014).

Furthermore, a compassionate teacher has prosocial behaviour and intends to create a prosocial classroom (Bankard, 2015). 'Prosocial behaviour' is generally understood and defined as voluntary behaviour that benefits others or promotes harmonious relations with others (Bergina et al., 2003). The study conducted by Leiberger et al. (2011) concludes that the cultivation of compassion through loving-kindness meditation (LKM) significantly increased participants prosocial behaviour. Their findings support the connection between enhanced feelings of compassion and increased prosocial behaviour.

In recent times, students' well-being has generated increasing international concern and is now widely viewed as integral to education. There is a growing interest in research on how the education system contributes to promoting students' development and quality of life when student well-being is incorporated into education policy (Anderson & Graham, 2015; Bradley et al., 2018; De Jong, 2007; Engels et al., 2004; Sangay Jamtsho, 2017; Van Petegem et al., 2007). 'Well-being' is generally understood as a positive emotional state that is the result of a harmony between the sum of specific context factors on the one hand and the personal needs and expectation towards the school on the other hand (Engels et al., 2004). Well-being is further described, and in reference to the Bhutanese context, as a quality of life, characterised by sound health, peace of mind, positive relationships, prosperity and contentment (Sangay Jamtsho, 2017).

Interestingly, most of the research studies revealed that the well-being of students in the classroom is largely dependent on the teacher. The kind of relationship the students have with their teacher influences student well-being. The study carried out by Van Petegem et al. (2006), for example, suggests that a teacher who is perceived by students as helpful, friendly and supportive contributes to increasing students' well-being through a positive relationship.

A number of longitudinal studies provide evidence that a teacher's supportive relationship with students has positive effects on primary school students' behavioural and academic adjustments (Curby et al., 2009; Hagenauer et al., 2015; Hughes et al., 2012; Meehan et al., 2003). Empirical research has begun to show further support for this claim (Bradley et al., 2018; Engels et al., 2004). Students who are not emotionally well regulated have a higher tendency towards developing disruptive behaviours, and they are in the greatest need of a supportive relationship with their teacher. Teacher's genuine care and concern for their diverse students is necessary for students to succeed academically as well as socially and emotionally (McAllister & Irvine, 2016; Kinzang Lhendup et al., 2018)

Teachers well-being is also noted as a significant factor in cultivating students well-being. Research suggests that socially and emotionally competent teachers set the tone for positive and supportive relationships between teachers and students. These supportive relationships promote students' well-being and learning, with teachers more attuned to assessing students' emotional and learning needs (Hagenauer et al., 2015; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Similarly, Kidger et al. (2009) assert that when a teacher's emotional health is in jeopardy, the ability to support and respond to students appropriately is reduced. One such phenomenon that is most likely to affect teacher's emotional health is 'compassion fatigue'.



## **Compassion fatigue**

The term compassion fatigue was first used in the literature in 1992 in the United States by a registered nurse, Carla Joinson. In the nursing literature, it was initially referred to as a unique form of burnout that affected the caregivers and resulted in a loss of the ability to nurture, due to physical and emotional exhaustion (Ledoux, 2015).

Compassion fatigue can grow through the stress of wanting, but not being able, to help individuals in distress (Figley, 1999). This could suggest that teachers who are working with traumatised students may be more at risk of developing compassion fatigue. Similarly, Robinson (2005) warns that compassion fatigue may be a growing concern within the school settings as the teachers are more likely to encounter traumatised students on a regular basis. Koenig, Rodger and Specht (2017) describe compassion fatigue in educators as the natural emotional and behavioural reactions stemming from exposure to students who are experiencing a traumatic event, combined with the stress caused by the desire to help the traumatised students.

Teachers with compassion fatigue are reported to feel a loss of control, empathy and responsibility (Hoffman & Palladino, 2007). These unpleasant experiences and emotions cause suffering and negatively impact teachers as well as student motivation and attitude towards learning (Koenig et al., 2017). This can finally rob classrooms of caring and committed educators. With reduced capacity for compassion, teachers with compassion fatigue may not be able to relieve the suffering of their students. More importantly, if left unrecognised and untreated, compassion fatigue can lead to serious health outcomes.

## **Self-compassion**

To alleviate one's suffering and heal oneself with kindness, Neff (2003) discusses a powerful inner resource termed 'Self-compassion'. 'Self-compassion' is defined as extending compassion towards self when faced with the experience of suffering.

It involves opening to and embracing one's own suffering; not avoiding or disconnecting from it (Neff, 2003). It is an ability to be aware of one's own pain and suffering and generating a desire to alleviate one's suffering (Neff & McGehee, 2010). The vast majority of research on self-compassion has been carried out using the Self-Compassion Scale (SCS) developed by Kristin Neff in 2003, which assesses trait levels of self-compassion.

Self-compassion is found to have a direct association with the individual's emotional well-being. For example, studies have shown that higher scores on the Self-Compassion Scale have been associated with greater levels of happiness, optimism, life satisfaction, body appreciation, perceived competence, and motivation (Neff & Germer, 2017). Similarly, the research conducted by Beaumont et al., (2016) in the United Kingdom has revealed that student counsellors and student cognitive behavioural psychotherapists with higher levels of self-compassion experience greater well-being and reduced burnout.

Self-compassion is also related to lower levels of depression, anxiety, stress, and fear of failure (Finlay-Jones et al., 2015). Furthermore, the study conducted by Neff and Vonk (2009) revealed that self-compassion is reported to make individuals feel better about their abilities and is associated with more stability in feelings of state 'Self-worth'. It is interesting to note that self-compassion also nurtures one's ability to support and encourage interpersonal trust. For instance, research has found that college students with higher levels of self-compassion tend to have more compassionate goals in relationship with friends and roommates (Crocker & Park, 2004).

Studies have revealed that self-compassion can be used as a coping strategy to mitigate the prevalence and levels of compassion fatigue (Beaumont et al., 2016; Finlay-Jones et al., 2015; Upton, 2018). More importantly, self-compassion has the ability to promote emotional self-regulation and increase teachers sense of well-being as well as their capacity to manage classroom behaviour by maintaining supportive relationships with students.

## Compassion and Education for Gross National Happiness (EGNH)

The nation-wide reform initiative called Educating for Gross National Happiness (EGNH) was launched in the year 2009 by the Ministry of Education in Bhutan. EGNH was primarily aimed at encouraging schools in Bhutan to teach GNH values and principles in the classroom, and through both curriculum and extra-curricular activities. The essential idea was to make teachers GNH minded. The reform initiative was focused on infusing GNH values, including compassion into their everyday teaching in the classroom and more importantly, promote a GNH inspired learning environment for the students. GNH inspired learning environment allows the teacher to model compassion to students and encourage students to be compassionate. Kezang Sherab (2013) advocates the importance of teachers to consciously model good practices to communicate a wide range of GNH values including compassion to their students in the form of the hidden curriculum. Furthermore, the findings of the study (Kinjang Lhendup et al., 2018) have revealed that Bhutanese teachers play a critical role in developing compassion in students by being positive role models.

The teaching profession allows teachers to model compassion to the students and with each other (Jazaieri, 2018). In the words of Goleman (1996):

There is perhaps no subject where the quality of the teacher matters so much, since how a teacher handles her class is in itself a model, a de facto lesson in emotional competence – or the lack thereof. Whenever a teacher responds to one student, twenty or thirty others learn a lesson. (p. 279)

When a teacher practices and models compassion in the classroom, staffroom and schoolyard, positive interactions are experienced (Kezang Sherab, Maxwell, & Cooksey, 2016), supported with genuine care (Castano, 2012), and there is the demonstration of respect for each other (Conklin, 2008). This kind of learning environment not only support students' academic achievements but, most importantly, it encourages students to cultivate compassion in themselves. This indicates that compassionate teachers are needed more than ever to cultivate

compassionate values in students to realise the vision of a GNH- infused education system to create a compassionate Bhutanese society.

The insight of GNH-infused education system resonates well with the Bhutanese researcher Kezang Sherab (2013), who argued that the ultimate goal of EGNH in Bhutan is to produce school graduates who understand the interconnected nature of reality, without excessive desires, and being compassionate to all beings. Other scholars, outside the Bhutan context, echo the importance of compassion in educating children. For instance, Miller (1981) argued that compassion is a basic source for a child's development, and should be included in every teacher's repertoire.

While much educational research has been conducted on the Bhutanese education system and EGNH, (for example Deki C Gyamtso, Kezang Sherab, Maxwell, & Boylan, 2017; Kezang Sherab, 2013; Kezang Sherab et al., 2016; Pema Tshomo, 2016; Schuelka & Maxwell, 2016), there is a paucity of research focused on compassionate teaching and learning of any curriculum subject in the classroom and its influence on positive student-teacher relationship through an increased well-being of the teacher and student. Studies on these topics might help in informing how education plays a role to build compassionate citizens that would ultimately help to achieve the national aspiration of creating a compassionate society and achieving GNH.

### **Recommendations for cultivating compassion in the classroom**

It is evident from the various literature that compassion is a necessary skill for the teachers in making learning more enriching and meaningful in the classroom. In Bhutan, EGNH emphasises that cultivating GNH values and principles including compassion in students has the aim of producing a GNH graduate. In order to achieve this objective, a teacher's role in the lives of the students remains critical.

Embodying the skill of compassion helps teachers to reach out to students with compassionate acts. Kezang Sherab (2013) argued that if teachers need to

teach GNH values to students, it is critical that teachers initiate a more in-depth analysis through critical reflection and discourse on their own values. Similarly, His Majesty Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck spoke to teacher educators of Bhutan on leading by example,

“... You cannot tell children to be strong if you are not strong yourself. If you don't know anything about the subject that you are teaching how much of it are you going to give to your students, you cannot give what you do not have ...” (Bhutan Broadcasting Service of Bhutan (BBS), 2014).

This is a powerful insight that invites all the stakeholders responsible for providing education in Bhutan to contemplate on how to encourage teachers to become compassionate if they are to cultivate compassion in the students. Having understood the importance of a teacher's role in cultivating compassion in students, the following recommendations might help inform the way forward:

- Research on compassion in Bhutan will contribute to the understanding of the status of compassionate classroom teaching and learning process.
- The Ministry of Education in Bhutan could design evidence-based professional learning programmes for teachers and students related to compassion to raise teacher's self-efficacy for integrating compassion with a special focus on classroom practices.
- Teacher education colleges may offer programmes and courses related to compassionate pedagogy in the classroom.
- Finally, the Royal Education Council (REC) of Bhutan can consider integrating compassion related subject matter into the curriculum across all levels without any impact on the content and time of the specific school subject.

## Conclusion

The construct 'compassion' is already deeply ingrained in Bhutanese society. The national aspiration of creating a compassionate society is enshrined in the constitution of Bhutan. However, there is a paucity of research on how this national aspiration could be achieved through education. Therefore, work that is more empirical is needed to examine how and what Bhutan is doing to create a compassionate society in realizing the national goals of GNH.

Research on compassion in various settings particularly in the education sector might help the relevant organizations to initiate and design professional programmes for the teachers in the classroom. This is because teachers need compassionate pedagogy and self-care to make teaching and learning in the classroom more effective. Moreover, pre-service teachers need pedagogy infused with compassion to become compassionate teachers. This will ultimately contribute to achieving the national aspiration of creating a compassionate society in fulfilling the goals of GNH.

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