



Laurie Levine (woman in skirt) and Alison Telsey (woman in slacks) meet with Bhutanese principals and assistant principals.

# MORE LESSONS *from* BHUTAN

6 YEARS LATER, CHANGE TAKES ROOT AND FLOURISHES

By Alison Telsey and Laurie Levine

*In April 2011, JSD published “Lessons from Bhutan: Embrace cultural differences to effect change” (Levine, Telsey, & McCormack, 2011), which described the experiences of several U.S. educators who learned their own transformative lessons while leading professional learning in special education abroad. In this follow-up article, the authors reflect on what they learned and discuss their challenges and successes after six years of working with teachers and principals in Bhutan.*

**I**t has been six years since we began our work promoting sustainable special education programs and practices in Bhutan, a small Buddhist country in the Himalayan Mountains. Working with the Special Education Advisory Committee, under the auspices of a nonprofit organization, the Bhutan Foundation, we have volunteered our time working as professional learning facilitators to foster the implementation of the special education program.

Now it’s time to reflect on what we learned, share suc-

cessful elements of our experience, and explore how the knowledge acquired can impact our future work in the field.

This special education project was initiated in 2008 by an American family in collaboration with the Bhutan Foundation and the Bhutanese Ministry of Education. Since then, teams of volunteer educators have donated their time to train Bhutanese teachers, principals, parents, and college faculty in special education assessment and instructional practices. Under the direction of our advisory committee, most of the professional development occurred during the summer months; however, planning and communication with key stakeholders occurred on an ongoing basis throughout the year.

Education for children with special needs in Bhutan now looks markedly different that it did at the inception of this project.

## SIGNS OF GROWTH

How do we know there's been growth? Let's take a look at the changes that have occurred.

### *Before 2008:*

- Special education services were limited. Most special education programs were directed toward children with visual or hearing impairments.
- The majority of teachers had little background in special education programming and practices.
- Few educational resources in the schools were designed specifically for students with special needs.
- Community awareness of the needs and capabilities of people with disabilities was limited.
- Many parents were keeping their children with disabilities at home.
- Communication among the Ministry of Education, parent groups, and other stakeholders was just beginning.



Laurie Levine with two Bhutanese students.

### *In 2015:*

- Bhutan has 10 schools in which children with learning difficulties are identified and provided with services in either inclusionary settings or self-contained classes.
- Over 400 educators have participated in professional learning focusing on disability awareness, screening, identification, and effective instructional practices.
- The Ministry of Education has a separate division devoted to special education, and Bhutan has developed a national special education policy.
- Stakeholder meetings with various agencies serving individuals with disabilities are ongoing.
- All 10 special needs schools have access to special education resources, including books, manipulatives, and DVDs.
- Young adults with disabilities are participating in internships in the hospitality industry, and there are plans for additional employment opportunities. This represents an expansion of already established opportunities in traditional arts and bakeries.
- The number of students with disabilities entering the

schools has increased.

- More parents are attending parent support and advocacy groups.
- Simultaneously, Bhutan has developed other civil service organizations that are addressing special education issues.
- The Royal University of Bhutan has developed a special education module.

This progress was only possible by recognizing that building open and trusting relationships in a culturally diverse environment was as critical to the work as instilling the fundamental tenets of special education.

Trusting relationships were essential in order to create a safe environment where people could take risks, ensure open communication that resulted in both positive and negative feedback, and inspire people to make changes even when those changes were difficult and time-consuming. Attaining these outcomes enabled us to collaboratively build a new special education program. As trusting partners, we persevered and engaged in problem solving to establish the strong foundation for progress to ensue.

### **BUILD POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS**

The most critical element to our success was the longevity and continuity of the program. For six summers, we returned to Bhutan to engage in professional learning and provide technical assistance. Each summer, we built on the knowledge and skills of our Bhutanese colleagues, and we have witnessed an evolution in their ability to support students with special needs.

When our team returned each year, we were greeted with the words, “Welcome back to your second home. We are so glad you’ve come back.” In addition to the summer program, we remained in touch and available for consultation throughout the year. Our team provided technical assistance by creating multiple avenues of communication, including e-mails and Skype calls, to involve the Bhutanese in decision making and serve as mentors to address any questions or issues related to the special education program.

In addition to consistency of involvement, we built positive relationships by complimenting and acknowledging the efforts of the Bhutanese, no matter how small. We remained cognizant of the significant cultural differences, and we became adaptable and flexible in changing our own styles. Though our professional goals were to provide high-quality professional learning, attending social functions and visiting teachers in their homes after work helped forge our bonds.

### **ENSURE SUSTAINABILITY**

The head of Bhutan’s special education division consistently reiterated the need for the Bhutanese to assume ownership of the special education process. We needed to build capacity to provide the Bhutanese with the skills and knowledge to sustain special education independently and ensure that the Bhutanese

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could assess their own progress and make the necessary changes when needed.

To do this, we worked with the Bhutanese Ministry of Education to develop its own vision, mission, and guiding principles to develop high-quality special education practices. Over time, we broadened our professional learning to include not only large conferences, but also embedded professional learning in schools, leadership training, and ultimately the train the trainer model in summer 2014.

Since the program’s inception, we recognized the important role of school leaders in moving special education forward. Initially, teams of teachers and administrators attended our large conferences together to hear the same message. We have consistently supported and developed leadership and have encouraged ongoing collaboration amongst administrators.

However, after six years, school leaders needed additional time and opportunities to work together to problem solve, discuss effective evaluation tools, and share best practices in a structured professional learning community. In 2014, we introduced summer leadership training multiday sessions. Leadership training drew high marks from principals, who no longer viewed themselves as solely managers but were now more ready and willing to view themselves as instructional leaders.

Our goal for the train the trainer model was to prepare the Bhutanese educators to become the primary professional learning providers in implementing special education. The Ministry of Education identified 20 exemplary educators — teachers, principals, administrators, and college faculty — as the future trainers. Many of the professionals had limited experience presenting to colleagues, so we decided to focus on both the art of training (the platform skills) and the science of training (the content).

In the months leading up to the Train the Trainer Institute, we developed modules focusing on the basics of special education and also highlighting best practices. The modules included scripted activities, slide presentations, and trainer notes. During the institute, we first modeled different lessons and activities from the modules. After observing, participants chose, practiced, and presented their lessons. Using coaching, videotaping, and constructive feedback, the Bhutanese reflected on their ability to engage an audience and to communicate the content effectively.

The practice sessions built confidence, knowledge, and skills and allowed Bhutanese trainers to adapt the lessons and activities to make them their own. Under our guidance, the Bhuta-

nese turned over the special education modules to teachers and principals from two newly identified schools that will begin serving students with special needs in the near future.

Bhutanese teacher Yeshi Choeki found the two-day Train the Trainer Institute very useful. “The content was introduced to us through strategies that we could use as a facilitator,” she said. “All sessions had hands-on experiences and tips on becoming a better presenter. The video feedback together with the feedback from the U.S. specialists and colleagues were very effective in letting us see what we required to improve further. We are now more confident and prepared.”

### ONE SIMPLE GOAL

Having six years to reflect on the causes and consequences of our goals and actions has been the single most influential factor in our own development as instructors, trainers, and administrators. In the midst of a chaotic and still-developing situation, we were unable to pause and articulate the process by which we moved toward our goals or to even fully determine what that success would look like until after many years had passed.

Now, looking back on the progress Bhutan has made, we recognize that the success of our team’s actions was predicated on having one simple goal: the ability to leave and rely on the Bhutanese administrators, faculty, and staff to run their program locally and independently. Indeed, from the beginning, our goal has been to turn over the reins to the Bhutanese educators with the expectation that they will have the skills and knowledge to improve outcomes for students with special needs.

That imperative has led to major change, both fostering a sense of responsibility within the Bhutanese instructors and also creating a cultural shift toward serving students with learning difficulties. Over time, educators have developed the expertise and commitment necessary to ensure the sustainability of the special education program in the country.

When status quo is a no-go

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back to share with their peers. Not only does this allow for a sense of autonomy in their own profession, but it also empowers them to lead in a very authentic manner.

### CHANGE ISN'T EASY

Change is never easy. The transformation at Liberty High School has first and foremost been a process, and it has been hard. The transition has been carefully developed based on learning research, staff feedback, and reflection.

The resulting professional learning system has been designed and implemented with a keen eye to the school’s culture, built on programs and norms that have been defined by its community and stakeholders. As such, it is a living, dynamic organism within the school. Staff members are engaged and come ready

to learn because they are respected as professionals and learning what they need and want to learn to improve student learning in their classrooms.

- Always keep the *why* of the work (the reasons behind the actions, techniques, and standards used) in the forefront of our minds and as the cornerstone of the practices and processes we promote (Sinek, 2009);
- Remember to acknowledge rather than criticize and recognize that small steps lead to big gains;
- Observe and listen to our constituents to understand the cultural implications of the work;
- Be flexible and adaptable as we offer suggestions and prepare professional learning, always keeping our audiences and the cultural context in mind;
- Consistently acknowledge the importance of trusting relationships that foster open, direct, and honest communication; and
- Collaborate with educational leaders to develop a system of accountability that defines what success looks like.

These lessons learned will continue to influence our work as professional developers in the U.S. This is the legacy that we hope we leave in Bhutan as the project ensues and the driving force as we continue our endeavors.

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