

Exploring the Heart of Education Through Spirituality and Sustainability: The way we live and the way we educate dictate the future

by
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Introduction

My presentation aims to explore education at its heart and how it relates to the way we educate ourselves and others, the way we live, and how it can pave the way towards our own and society's wellbeing now and in the future.

The inter-relationship and inter-dependency between education and sustainable development is inseparable. From a developmental perspective, education and development are mutually reinforcing and complementary; with education promoting and supporting sustainable, socially just livelihoods for people, and with societies evolving and changing while ensuring social, economic and political and environmental balance and stability.

We human beings are at the top of the animal world, not because of our superior strength, but because of our intellectual, emotional, and analytical capacities. Human babies are born to this world well-endowed with innate emotions and intelligence, which can be further fostered through social and environmental stimulation to ensure that they grow to their full potential. This fostering or stimulating process is what we call "Education" with a big "E", and is different from education with a small "e", which more accurately should be referred to as "schooling".

The "Education" I talk about is a holistic and comprehensive process that takes place throughout one's life – from birth, or actually even before birth, to death. This concept is not new and is in all the literature and studies on education development. However, despite spending billions and billions of dollars in setting up schools, hiring educators and training teachers, why are we still not better educated? Yes, we have produced brilliant politicians, bankers, lawyers, and scientists, but in my opinion we are still not adequately "educated" in the true sense of the word.

My lifelong experience and involvement in working in the area of education and development tells me that most societies have not been giving its' citizens "real" education. We are mostly interested in getting our schools and universities churn out well-trained graduates whose certificates will secure them good jobs, which in turn will bring wealth, material goods, social recognition and prestige – the mark of "success" in our present-day competitive world. In reality, what our education system is practicing is only "schooling" and "certification" and not "real education". It has only provided people with a narrow set of skills to "compete" and to "consume", and gave them false values by equating happiness with the pursuit of wealth and material goods. We rarely think beyond what all these mean? Will all that material wealth and prestige bring us greater peace and real happiness? In fact, many successful and wealthy people are discontented and stressed, and many so-called

wealthy and developed societies are plagued by increasing rates of violence, suicide, physical and mental illnesses, environmental pollution, and social unrest.

The sad fact is that as parents and educators, we all know that our education system is deficient or broken, but we have not done much to change it. Trying to effect change in the education system is often seen as too big, too complex, and too difficult to achieve. But, I believe that change is possible, even though it may not be perfect; but change must start with us and start now.

The heart of education is the education of the heart.

Let's explore how we can effect change in education beyond "schooling" towards real education that is holistic, integrated, and will also support development that is politically, socially, economically and culturally sustainable and balanced. To achieve this we need to get to the heart of education. And for me, the heart of education is first and foremost *education of the heart*. What do I mean by that? What I mean is that it is not enough for education to inculcate and transmit practical and technical skills, crucial and necessary though these are. For education to be transformative, it must foster values for spiritual, ethical, and emotional well-being, the true basis of wisdom, contentment and happiness.

Spirituality as the heart of education

Before I discuss spirituality as the heart of education, let me make one point clear. I am not a religious person and I do not claim to know much about the teachings of different religions. I come from a Buddhist culture and call myself a Buddhist, but I am not a Buddhist scholar. When I talk about spirituality and ethics, my reference point is in the context of Buddhist teachings and values, not as a religion, but as a philosophy of life.

The Buddha tells us that life is learning and learning is about knowing the nature of truth. Learning the nature of truth or Dhamma needs to be based on respect for life and its relationship with all living and non-living things. And to truly learn, one needs to start with the self – learning mindfulness and self-awareness. This is why Buddhism places such importance on meditation (mindfulness) practice to tap into the healing power of spirituality for cultivation of mental strength, inner peace, moderation (or self-control), and loving kindness and compassion towards all living things (people, animals, nature). Meditation and reflective practices help us calm our mind and stay focused on the "present" and what truly matters now, instead of dwelling in the past, (regretting what we should have done, or resenting what others have done to us) or living in the future (thinking and worrying all the time about how to become successful or accumulating more and more). Such practice is what Buddhist teachings mean by "letting go" and freeing ourselves from "suffering" such as greed, attachment, etc. as basis for achieving true wisdom and happiness.

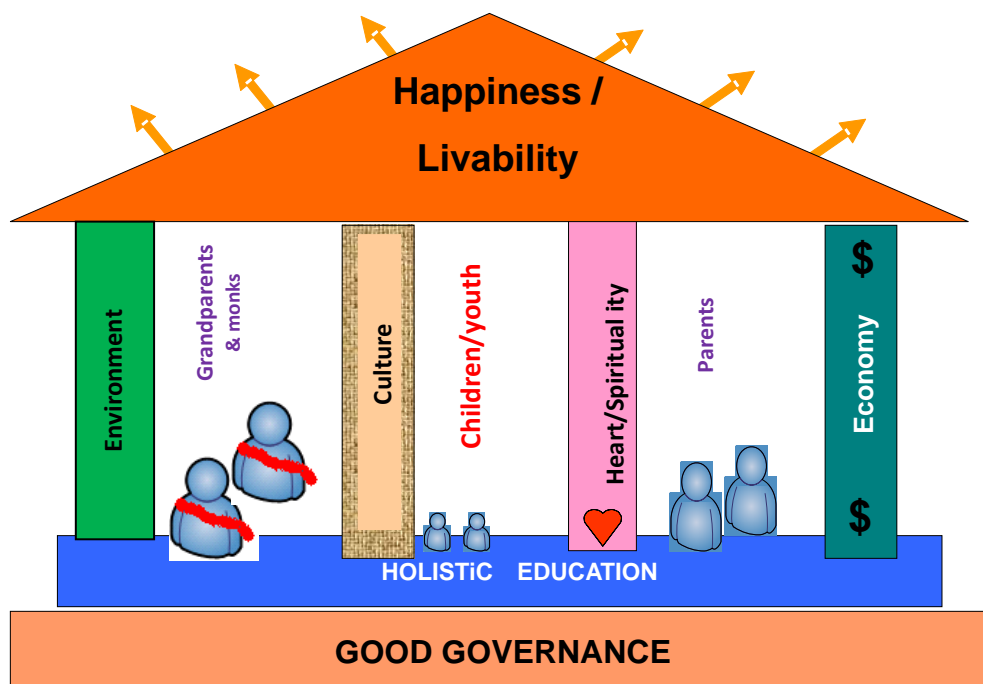
Now let's consider whether our schools and universities should help inculcate in our children and young people such basic spiritual values and practice of mindfulness, moderation, loving compassion and respect for self and others? For me, these spiritual and ethical values should be at the heart of education as they are the fundamental life skills or moral compass needed to guide children and young people to become better people, who would then become better citizens, better teachers, and better leaders to shape and guide our societies to live in peace, harmony, and cultural and ecological integrity, and social justice. This I what I call "Education of the Heart" to complement what most education systems have been

mostly doing: Education of the Head (learning to use our intellect); and Education of the Hands (learning to do things). For me, education should therefore be a balance of Education of the Head, the Hands and the Heart. It's only when education can help our children and young people develop their heads, their hands and their hearts simultaneously and effectively, can we call it real and holistic education. And it is only through supporting and advancing real and holistic education can we have development which is sustainable and socially just, and provide people with real contentment and happiness.

Proposed model for sustainable education and development

I will now detail how we can move towards a model of sustainable education and development which emphasizes balanced development of the head, hands, and heart. A model of holistic education and sustainable development needs to balance economic development, environmental harmony, promotion of cultural integrity, and spiritual well-being. Spiritual well-being is what I have indicated above as development of the “HEART”. Unfortunately, the dominant development paradigm today tends to under-emphasize the “HEART”, i.e. the spiritual or psychosocial and emotional wellbeing of people, and over-emphasize the material aspects of life.

Figure 1: Sustainable Education for Development



In my model, holistic education is conceptualized as the foundation for development. The four pillars representing the different dimensions of development are anchored and are part of the education process. In this model, children and young people are at the centre, taking part in the development process and are actively educating themselves and their peers. Parents,

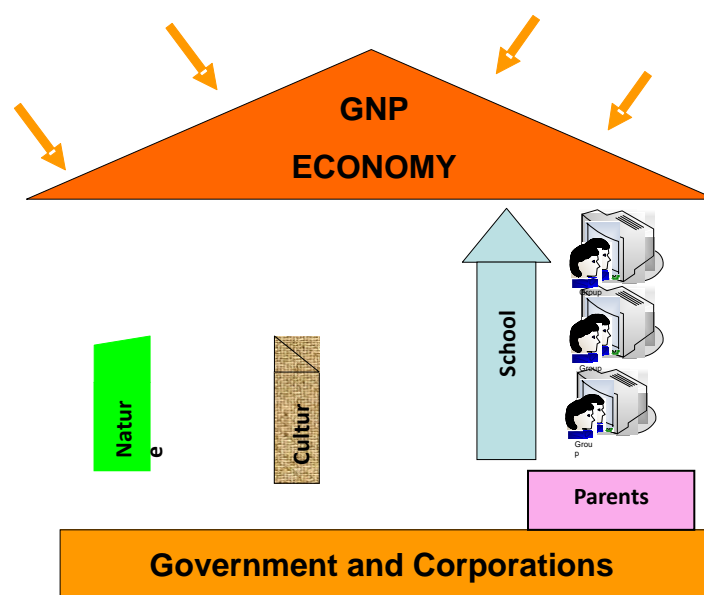
grandparents, and spiritual leaders are not excluded, as in the case of most modern education processes, but must be engaged in the education process of their children and grandchildren. Parents are the key breadwinners, but must also be provide emotional support and love for their children. Grandparents and spiritual leaders are symbols of wisdom. They are the holders/preservers of traditional knowledge and skills, and also practical knowledge and experience on sustainable use of natural resources. They are also the main sources for transmission of spiritual, cultural values and knowledge for environmental protection to children and young people. Together, they (parents, grandparents, spiritual leaders) contribute to supporting holistic education. At the base of the model is “good governance”, which holds up the entire model which forms the stable social and political structure which endows all under its roof with security, well-being and genuine happiness.

Thus, deciding development priorities is critical in implementing the sustainable development model. One simple rule is that development priorities should maximize strengthening of all four pillars of development, even if not in equal measure, then at least avoid seriously damaging any of the pillars, and ensure that the benefits compensate for any of the losses. One should avoid a development model that supports a single pillar to the detriment of the other pillars because that would undermine the balance and sustainability of the entire society.

Current predominant model of development

Let’s look at our model of development as it exists today. The development model that is widely practiced today stresses competition and economic growth (GDP) as its ultimate goal. This growth comes from over-taxing our environmental capital, misusing our human capital, and cultural heritage. Everything becomes monetized, including “Schooling”.

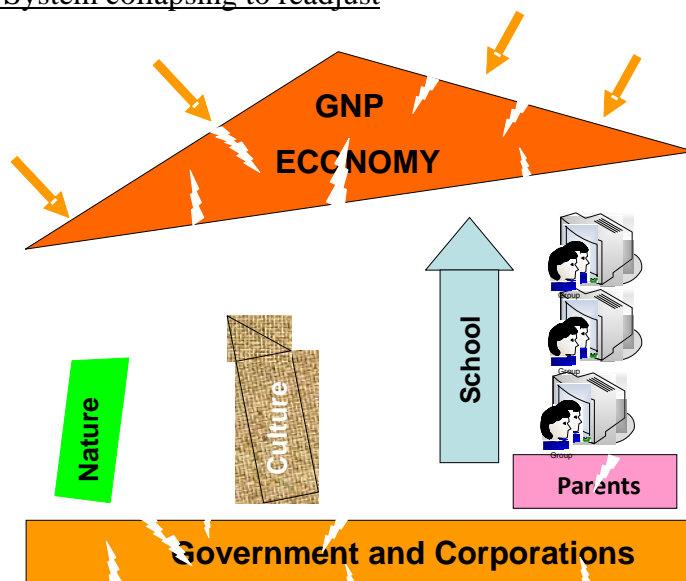
Figure 2: **Boom:** Unbalance growth and development is unstable and under stress



In education, the television has taken over the time parents and grandparents normally spend with the kids. We have handed over the intergenerational and societal transfer of knowledge, history, culture, and wisdom to the media. But, the media is supported by business corporations whose interest is in promoting their bottom-line – hence the media often encourages mindless consumption and promotes greed and violence as entertainment. The media and the entertainment industry have now become the predominant channels for shaping societal values for the young. No wonder, there is so much communication breakdown between the younger and the older generation. We also cannot blame the parents. Parents now have little time for their children. Parents too have been victims of the development model that overly stresses material well-being and career advancement. Hence parents have to work very hard to support the kids through school as well as to satisfy their kids and their own material needs.

Without safeguards for balance, the skewed development processes will put stress on the system, leading to imbalance and instability, which may not be apparent in the short-term but certainly will lead to systems failure in the long-run. Imbalances are often witnessed in the form of cycles of boom and bust - a way for the system to re-adjust, as we have witnessed in the recent global financial meltdown, food and industrial riots, and even changes in political leadership in some countries.

Figure 3: **Bust:** System collapsing to readjust



Getting to the Heart of Education

This is where getting to the heart of education and transforming its processes and content can help shift the development paradigm towards creating a better and more people-friendly future for our children and a more sustainable world for all living and non-living things. To do this, we must stop pretending that “schooling” is education and stop relying only on

schools and teachers to be responsible for the education of our children and young people. As indicated in my model, we need to unleash the potential of children and youth, and tap into the wealth of knowledge and experience of parents, grandparents, and wisdom of spiritual and community leaders to contribute to education of their young. Teachers and education officials too need to boldly use these available resources around them, instead of keeping them outside the school walls. In doing so, education becomes more than schooling, and learning will become more participatory, more relevant, more complete, and most importantly, learning will be FUN.

Transforming the process of learning and involving available resources to support participatory learning must also go hand-in-hand with transforming the content of what we teach in schools. The school curriculum as designed in most education systems today, generally does not respond very effectively to needs of children and young people. It only provides them with a narrow range of technical skills (reading, writing, math, etc.) and little real life experience to face the challenges outside the school walls or meet the needs of families and communities. No wonder so many parents in places where education is of poor quality, do not want to send their kids to school. Schooling gives certificates as false rewards, just like the mass media gives people a false sense of needs which drives us into indebtedness and unsustainable materialistic life style.

There is no reason as to why we also cannot broaden the curriculum and make it more relevant and practical even at a very young age starting from pre-school and primary school by including practical life skills, and survival skills relevant to their social and environmental contexts. I suggest that the curriculum include learning of indigenous knowledge and spiritual knowledge which reside mostly with our grandparents, crafts people in the community, and spiritual teachers like monks and nuns. It is through consciously rooting our young to their culture, traditions, and wisdom of our society through transfer of indigenous knowledge and spiritual and moral values, can we expect our young to know and respect their past, understand the present, and value and protect the future. This kind of learning will greatly complement current education and narrow the gap between school, family, community and society. This kind of learning is what the Buddha means by *Learning is Life*.

So to summarize, I go back to my earlier model and depict how such participatory holistic learning can take place. In this model of learning (Figure 4), the base of holistic education is active children and community participation, working closely with all available community and spiritual resources, to support child-friendly, spiritual, and relevant life-skills-based content for JOYFUL LEARNING. Such a holistic learning process will, as depicted in Figure 5, empower children and young people to access, select and process information and knowledge around them from all available sources, gain understanding, develop skills, and form positive attitudes and behavior, and take responsibility for themselves, their families and communities.

In Laos, my organization PADETC has step by step taken action to apply these principles proposed in this model of joyful learning with cooperation of schools, communities and temples with some degree of success which I will briefly share with you.

Figure 4: A Model of Participatory Holistic Learning

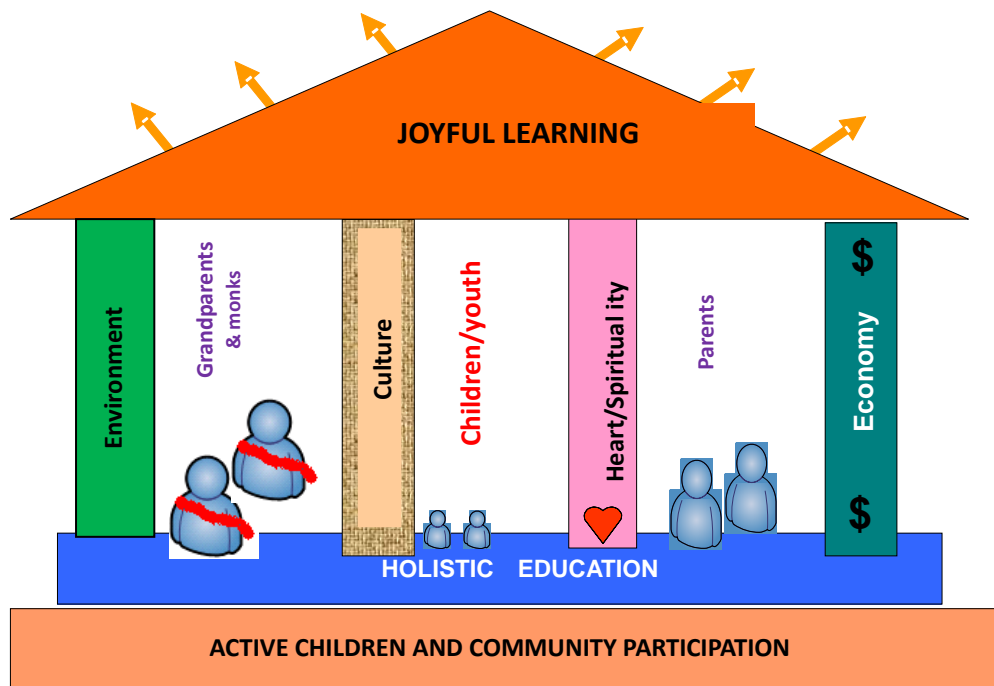
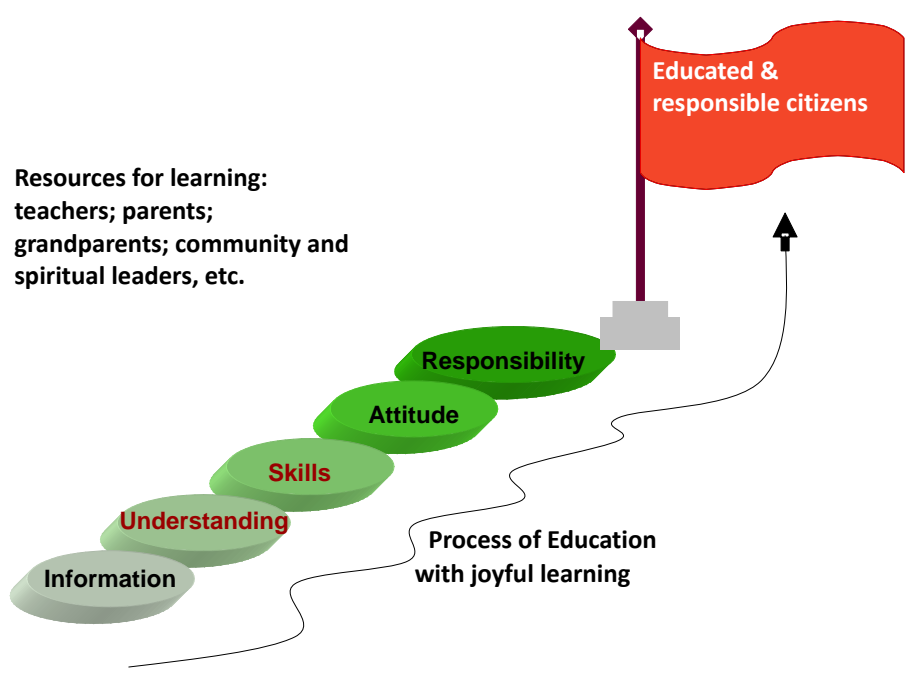


Figure 5: Process of education with joyful learning



Some concrete experience from Laos

Peer-to-peer learning

I have successfully promoted peer-to-peer learning in many schools by getting children and young people to be involved in helping each other learn. For example, instead of having teachers lead in story-telling to teach language, I encouraged teachers to let children read stories to their classmates themselves. This has encouraged children to read and increased their confidence through getting them to read to others, and express themselves through story-telling. From telling stories by reading storybooks, they move to writing their own stories to tell their friends. This way reading and writing becomes more fun and meaningful and at the same time build critical listening and verbal skills from a very young age on.

Training youth volunteers to assist in schools

I also supported the organization and training of youth volunteers to help teachers lead extra-curricular activities, such as aerobic dancing, drama and sports. Children look upon the young volunteers as their elder brothers and sisters and open up to them more than their teachers, therefore learning faster and enjoy learning more. At the same time, the over-worked teachers welcome the help of the young volunteers to relieve them of some of their responsibility for extra-curricular activities. This becomes a win-win situation for children and teachers. Currently, there are active networks of youth volunteers formed in all 17 provinces of the country. Seeing the great potential of young people to stimulate education and development, a number of development agencies also started supporting various types of youth development groups to address development issues like HIV/AIDS; prevention of substance abuse; and trafficking.

For the young people, critical skills of leadership, teambuilding and sharing and empathy are developed and can be transferred into later life.

Children's media program

Also, some of the young people, seeing the power of the media, decided that to use the media to reach out to their peers. With support from my organization and others, young people have negotiated with local radio and TV networks to provide them broadcasting time to run their own youth radio and TV programs. These programs have a larger following among the young than many of the state-produced programs, thereby giving the young some control over the airwaves.

Involving community leaders or crafts people to teach indigenous knowledge

Starting initially with a few schools, I have also encouraged skilled crafts people of the community to help teachers teach indigenous knowledge, like weaving, traditional foods, traditional dance, and so on. Through learning traditional knowledge from their elders, children get to know more of their culture, customs, traditional crafts, and traditional medicines and food. This way, the elderly in the community feel valuable and more linked to their children and grandchildren, thereby closing the generation gap. Through such

processes of learning, school children and teachers from different areas have proudly revived producing products unique of their area, such as basketry, textile weaving; traditional jams, etc. for sale at school fairs and at the local markets. This has helped weaned children off “junk” food and “plastic goods”, in favor of natural and organic products and helped to preserve some traditional skills. As a result, the teaching of indigenous knowledge has been officially endorsed by the Ministry of Education.

Involving monks to teach spiritual values

Another major breakthrough we have initiated is the involvement of Buddhist monks to teach Buddhist ethics in schools. This project called “Dhamma Sanchorn” (Mobile Dhamma) education focuses on inculcating in school children spiritual and social values of respect, honesty, justice, environmental protection, and healthy living using a variety of child-centered approaches, such as telling of Buddha stories, songs/chants, and temple fairs. Through these methods, children are taught about respect of parents, respect of self; self-management; care of nature, etc. Children also learn how to meditate both in school and also at summer camps. Recently, the Dhamma Sanchorn project has included teaching teachers reflection and meditation to help them to learn better control, especially in anger management and tolerance to become better teachers and models for their children and members of the community.

Apart from teaching in schools, the Dhamma Sanchorn network of monks, also teach in the drug rehabilitation and handicapped children’s centers to provide them with spiritual and emotional support to give them courage to face up to challenges and difficult circumstances.

The Dhamma Sanchorn education project in focusing on the education of the Heart and preparing children for responsible adulthood is highly welcomed by schools, teachers and parents and is expanding rapidly. In a few short years, it is already having a very positive impact on the behaviour of children, teachers, and families, such as a reduction in petty theft, school yard, bullying, cheating, and child abuse.

Integrative learning

As far as possible, we have also encouraged learning which integrates subject learning to practical life skills and real life situation. For example, learning of science, mathematics, and nutrition is integrated with organic gardening and raising earthworms using kitchen waste. Through this, kids learn about recycling, plant biology, the environment, and the discipline of taking care of another life form. These skills are easily transferred to improve the household economy as children by children and parents using these skills to improve their vegetable gardens and rice fields.

Through these various ways, education has gone beyond relying only on textbooks and teachers. Education now takes place anywhere, anytime, and are no longer seen as segregated and separated school subjects. Learning now takes place inside and outside the schools without school fences separating learning in school from learning in the home, the community and temple. Similarly, there are also no roofs and ceilings to block children’s imagination beyond what they can see and hear. Slowly, through such processes, an ecology of learning for sustainable and value-based living is taking shape.

Conclusion

After more than 10 years of working with teachers, community and spiritual leaders, I am convinced that education needs to be holistic and integrative which stresses stimulation of the intellect (Head), working with the “Hands”, and most important of all inculcating spiritual values of the “Heart”. That is the most practical way to improve the way we learn and impact the way we live, and build a better future for the well-being and happiness of our children and society.