

No smoking, please. Or Guidebooks.

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Not long ago, I read a book called "Bliss" in which the author explored the topic of happiness---what creates it, why it is hard to attain, etc., and whether certain geography plays a role.p He went to a number of different places where people reportedly were unusually happy. (One was Iceland. I was in Iceland maybe 4 years ago, and it was true---happy country, happy people.p However, timing is all. I doubt if Icelanders are particularly happy at the the moment).

Another happy place he studied was the Himalayan country of Bhutan.p Smoking, he pointed out, was against the law in Bhutan. He didn't cite that as a cause for happiness---just a point of interest---but actually, I think I'd be a little happier if smoking were illegal in this country.

Bhutan is a country I have never been to, and to be honest, it is not a county I ever think about. I probably go days on end---maybe weeks, or months---without ever thinking of Bhutan.p But this morning I was alerted to something in The Bhutan Observer: an op-ed piece written by a teacher who is concerned about lessening of standards in the educational system of that tiny country.

Presently, we see new guidebooks to Lois Lowry's The Giver circulating among students. Soon enough, I foresee other aspiring teachers initiating guidebooks on class XI and XII textbooks. Will we ever succeed in creating independent readers? Isn't the teachers' guidebook provided by the Curriculum and Professional Support Division (CAPSD) enough? If not, I would like to call upon the CAPSD to strengthen the teachers' guide so that teachers will be able to guide the students in the best possible way.

In the west, guidebooks (not teachers' guide) are not advised in schools. Instead, students are encouraged to make their own interpretations of texts with guidance from teachers. As long as our students justify their answers with good reasons, they are right, considering that no two readers will interpret the same text in the same way.

Therefore, I would like to urge all our stakeholders – high school English teachers, education officials, English curriculum officials, parents and students – to take note of this issue and ponder over it. I am glad to be able to bring this personal opinion to a public forum as a

concerned teacher, who had been part of the English Curriculum Review Team. I feel the authorities should either halt commercial guidebooks or encourage guidebooks that will not hamper our students' meaning-making skills, but instead, scaffold their language skills and critical thinking. Parents may guide their children at home, and censor the materials they are using for their study. It is possible that children may not read their textbooks, but rely completely on guidebooks. Most importantly, teachers could use strategies and techniques that require complete reading of the text, and make their classroom activities so stimulating, thrilling and satisfying that students may never feel the need to use guidebooks. This will go a long way in instilling love for reading and creating life-long readers. I wish the stakeholders all the best in their ventures ahead in executing the new English curriculum and producing future citizens who are competent communicators and life-long readers.

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I'm sorry I didn't have room to quote all of his (or her?) essay because it was thoughtful and thought-provoking---and even though Bhutan has not been high on my places-to-think-about list, perhaps that will change now that I know teachers there like Sangay Biddha care so much about instilling a love of reading.

Good for you, happy little Himalayan country! And keep that smoking ban in place!

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