

# **A CURRICULAR PARADIGM BASED UPON VEDIC EPISTEMOLOGY: AN APPROACH TO DEVELOPING THE WHOLE PERSON**

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## **Abstract**

The Bhaktivedanta Dharma School (BDS) provides quality but yet affordable holistic education to the local Indonesian community in Bali. The school's educational orientation is inspired by the Vedic (Hindu) goals of fruition of knowledge (Vedanta or the essence of the Vedic scriptures) and devotion (Bhakti) to God (Krishna). The curriculum integrates the best of both the eastern and western approaches to enriching young minds. The strengths of both value systems are seen to be crucial in the all-round, dynamic development of children. Not only is academic excellence emphasized but character development and awareness of the higher spiritual purpose of life are also imparted to the kids. The role of the teacher extends beyond the taught curriculum and s/he plays a vital role in the character development of the child, through his or her own personal example. This paper examines the pedagogical effectiveness of the implemented framework of holistic education at BDS based upon the perceptions and experiences of the teachers working in the school. An ethnographic approach was employed as the main research methodology with participant observation and open-ended interviewing the primary means of data collection and analysis. A total of six teachers working at BDS were interviewed in this study. The findings of the study provide deeper insights on the differences between BDS and mainstream, traditional

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schools in terms of their structural and curricular characteristics and the key challenges participant teachers faced in orientating to the alternative learning culture of BDS.

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### **Introduction**

Bhaktivedanta Dharma School (BDS) is a private school in Bali that offers holistic education based upon Vedic (Hindu) ideals to the local community at affordable rates. It was started by the inspiration of Dr. T. D. Singh (1937 – 2006), the International Director of the Bhaktivedanta Institute and pioneer in the field of science and spirituality interface. He asserted that the root problem in civilization today is the adoption of a mechanistic model of life, based purely on the physical laws of nature. This, he explained, lies at the heart of the anomalies faced by society, hence, the need for a new paradigm which includes the non-material, metaphysical worldview, based on higher finer qualities of human existence.

The main strengths of BDS are in its approach to the teaching-learning process based on the character development of the child, its focus on having a scientific mindset alongside spiritual wisdom (the distilled essence of all religious principles), and its adoption of English language as a practical working language in day-to-day communication. Significantly, the school has embraced an interdisciplinary approach to the teaching and learning of subject content matter. For example, when the children at BDS learn new vocabulary, the holistic approach entails the use of the new words in art activities, mathematics and other subject areas to allow for extensive application of these words, leading to a greater degree of appropriation of words and their reuse in other contexts. The school serves as a centre for learning, not only for the children enrolled,

but also for parents and all teachers, staff and the community at large. BDS also adopts a novel approach to assessment where there are two sets of tests: basic and advanced. All students will sit for the basic paper while only those selected by the teacher will sit for the advanced paper. As for non-academic subjects such as art, physical education and music, students are assessed by the provision of cycles of feedback on their progress by their respective teachers, highlighting areas they have excelled at as well as areas in which they need to work on.

The fundamental principles underpinning the holistic approach to the education process in BDS are predicated on the guiding tenets of Vedanta or the essence of the Vedas. The Vedantic paradigm (besides dealing with salient spiritual principles expounded in the Vedas) also lays its focus on the imparting of the teachings of spiritually advanced personalities of yore as exemplars of ideal character through story-telling and narrations of significant episodes in their lives. In addition, the following are the mission statements of BDS in guiding educators and administrators in curricular planning as well as in enacting day-to-day activities:

- To help children understand and express their emotions
- To help children understand and recognize the difference between appropriate and inappropriate behaviour
- To help children develop and inquiring mind
- To help children express their creativity
- To help children reflect upon their actions and better understand themselves
- To provide a safe and caring learning environment
- To guide children in developing their spirituality with a scientific mindset

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All of the above are based on the principle of guiding children in developing their spirituality with a scientific mindset, through the spirit of inquiry.

### **Literature Review**

Holistic education is an eclectic and inclusive movement that emerged as an alternative to mainstream education that tends to be reductionistic and fragmented in character, reflecting “Cartesian-Newtonian” worldviews. It is an educational paradigm that integrates the ideas of humanistic education with spiritual philosophical ideas. It incorporates principles of spirituality, wholeness, and interconnectedness along with principles of freedom, autonomy, and democracy. Rather than being concerned with basic knowledge and skills acquisition, holistic education is concerned about the wholesome development (physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual) of the individual (Rudge, 2008).

Miller (2000) views holistic education as representing not a single pedagogical approach but an ecological paradigm of assumptions and principles that can be applied in diverse and flexible ways. He defines holistic education as a democratic pursuit concerned with both individual freedom and social responsibility. He is of the opinion that children should be given freedom to develop their potential according to their own individual natural, spiritual inclinations and yet be critically engaged in a constructive social milieu. His relationistic worldview of a holistic curriculum endorses an intrinsic connection between thinking and intuition, mind and body, self and society, the internal and external aspects of existence. Overall, Miller characterizes holistic education according to the following broad attributes:

- It nurtures the development of the whole person

- It revolves around egalitarian, open and democratic relationships
- It is concerned with life experiences
- It recognizes that cultures are people created and can be changed rather than being mechanistically conformed to
- It is based upon a deep reverence for life and the transcendent source of life.

Phil Gang (1990) posits that the purposes of holistic education, either directly or indirectly, are related to the concepts of wholeness and interconnectedness. He argues that holistic education would enable students to inculcate a better sense of harmony and spirituality and develop a global perspective on issues by appreciating the interrelatedness of all disciplines of learning. Besides the core themes of spirituality and interconnectedness, Rudge (2008) quoting from Education 2000, states ten basic tenets of holistic education:

- Nourish the inherent possibilities of human development
- Honour the individuality and creativity of each student
- Design learning to be experience-centric
- Embed the concept of 'wholeness' as the foundation of the educational process
- Situate educators to be facilitators of the learning process in an organic manner
- Present students with opportunities to making choices at every stage of the learning endeavour
- Empower learning to be participatory and democratic in orientation
- Mentor students to become global citizens by appreciating the diversity of human experiences and commonality of human interests

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- Revere life in all forms and nurture the relationship between living beings and the natural world
- Appreciate every person as a spiritual being and guide the healthy growth of his/her spiritual life to connect with his/her soul/deeper self.

In encapsulating the essence of holistic education, Miller (2000) aptly frames it to be the transformation of an individual and society to become more balanced and inclusive in their behaviours, thinking and activities. Nava (2001) in describing holistic education according to the framework of four key elements involving scientific, ecological, social and spiritual aspirations, emphasizes the dimension of spirituality to be the core of educational efforts as it allows a student's innate potential to grow. He argues that it is only through spirituality that a human being comes to know his/her true nature. Rudge (2008) argues that in fact spirituality is what that differentiates holistic education from all other alternative approaches to education. Holistic education is grounded to spiritual values and beliefs that support the inner transformation and spiritual evolution of humans. Unlike reformers such as Dewey and Holt who advocate greater democracy and freedom but kept spirituality separate from education, contemporary holistic educators promote the integration of spirituality in education. It ought to be noted that this conception of spirituality espoused within the holistic education movement is usually broad, inclusive, non-sectarian and detached from any particular faith or creed. It may not even involve a belief in a personal God. Forbes (2004) defines spiritual perfection as reaching a consciousness of "ultimacy," - the highest state of being that human existence can aspire to in attaining grace, self-actualization and enlightenment.

### **Research Methodology**

The main aim of this study is to examine the pedagogical effectiveness of the implementation of a framework of holistic education inspired by the Vedantic (Hindu) conception of epistemology. The following were the main research questions that scaffolded the research design of this study:

- 1) What are the key epistemological attributes and curricular structures of schools practicing holistic education that significantly differentiates them from traditional, mainstream schools?
- 2) What are the perceptions of teachers functioning in a holistic education environment on the strengths and drawbacks of working on a day-to-day basis within such an environment?

An ethnographic research approach was determined and adopted as the best means of data collection, analysis and interpretation. This was to allow for greater flexibility and openness in seeking answers to the postulated research questions. It is an attempt to comprehend intentions, beliefs, experiences and actions in terms of the frames of reference of those being studied (Burns, 2000). Participant observation and open-ended interviews are employed as the techniques for carrying out ethnographic fieldwork. Furthermore, participant observation enables the researchers to take part in the daily activities of the individuals being investigated to gain in-depth first-hand accounts of the themes that appear in the observed contexts (Burns, 2000). Open-ended interviews solicit detailed responses of the participants' perception of social reality as they experience it in their daily lives.

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In this study, the two key interview questions posed to teachers solicited their views on the differences they perceived between a holistic education-based school such as BDS and other mainstream schools as well as the challenges they faced in working within BDS's educational environment. A total of five full-time teachers at BDS of varying ages, educational backgrounds and teaching expertise were interviewed for this study.

### **Findings and Discussions**

#### Teacher X

Teacher X, thirty years of age, has degrees in tourism and education from universities in Bali. He has no prior teaching experience and he has been teaching at the Bhaktivedanta Dharma School for the past two years. He currently teaches English and physical education at <sup>1</sup>Primary 1-3 levels. He started off the interview by mentioning that he was happy working as a teacher in the school though he found the job of a teacher greatly challenging.

<sup>1</sup>Elementary education in Indonesia is from Primary One to Primary Six where children are between the ages of six to 11. After six years of elementary education, there are three years of junior high school and another three years of senior high school.



When asked for his views on the differences he perceived between this school and mainstream schools, he prefaced his comments by noting that his experiences in mainstream schools were limited to those of his own schooling days as a student. He pointed out that general feedback from parents highlighted the comfort they feel in placing their children in BDS as they find the educational climate in the school safe and secure for their children's holistic development. He contrasted that with what usually happens in traditional schools where specialized care for the welfare of the students, particularly the weaker ones, isn't always feasible due to the large intakes of student enrollment. Very rarely in these schools is high premium placed on the emotional development of students since the focus is on academic development of the students, largely due to the grades-driven educational culture of schools nowadays. Teacher X was quick to emphasize that at BDS teachers are encouraged to consider different approaches in relating with and educating each child since the needs of children are unique and vary in nature. In this way, teaching is customized and personalized to the requirements and abilities of students. He added that strict values of ethical and theistic behaviours are codified within curricular syllabus and imparted to children from an early age to reinforce the essentiality of cultivating proper decorum.

The BDS curriculum can be differentiated from others in that it promotes holistic education whereby teaching is done in a more complete, connected manner rather than the fragmented, compartmentalized ways in which education is usually delivered in traditional schools. Teacher X drew reference to an example of his own teaching to underscore this point – he teaches physical education and English not as separate subjects but as an integrated module to highlight the inter-disciplinary nature of learning. Another notable difference he stressed was the

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emphasis on the development of God consciousness amongst the children in the school. This was done in a non-sectarian and inclusive manner to appreciate the need to live harmoniously in a pluralistic society. The chief slogan of the school calls for God to be situated as the centre of all that we do in our daily lives. In fact, BDS has one classroom session set aside for spiritual storytelling – historical narratives of the lives, attributes and teachings of stalwart personalities from popular Vedic epics such as Mahabharata, Ramayana, Srimad Bhagavatam. These are shared and discussed to better understand their relevance and application in contemporary everyday contexts. The children also look upon these stalwart personalities as role models and imbibe their saintly qualities.

On the question of challenges he faced as a teacher in a holistic learning environment, Teacher X mentioned that the main one he faced was in applying himself to a different set of expectations as a teacher in discharging his roles and responsibilities. Unlike the teacher in normal mainstream schools whose prime duty is to prescriptively teach subject content knowledge mapped out in a fixed, bounded curriculum, here Teacher X has to stretch himself beyond and be fully involved in shaping other developmental aspects such as emotional, social, spiritual wholesome well-being of the child. Teacher X added that he has to constantly remind himself to function as an effective role model to his students to encourage them to learn and observe scrupulous demeanor at all times.

On the issue of possible areas of improvement to further enhance the educational quality of BDS, Teacher X was of the opinion that generally BDS's curriculum was rigorous and well-organized based upon Vedantic progressive principles. However, he felt that one area that the school management might want to focus on would be in provisioning for a comprehensive

teacher training program to better prepare teachers in the school to perform effectively in the alternative educational environment of BDS. This is critical since the educational systems in Indonesia are pedagogically not very sound and teacher-training not widespread to produce qualified teachers. So Teacher X's wishlist included initial and on the job training on various aspects of holistic educational design.

#### Teacher Y

Teacher Y, who is in her 20s, has a diploma in education and has undergone a few months of teacher training. She has one year of prior teaching experience in a Catholic kindergarten and she has been working for the Bhaktivedanta Dharma School for the past three months. She currently teaches English to the children at Primary 3 level.

When asked to comment on the differences between the educational systems of BDS and traditional schools, teacher Y highlighted the smaller class sizes at BDS in comparison to the average of forty students in a class in mainstream schools. This greatly lightens the teaching load of teachers at BDS since the reduced number of students in a class means a teacher can focus more attention on each individual student. In addition, two teachers are usually assigned to each class at BDS, enabling teaching to be a more collaborative effort and classroom management an easier task to handle. Unlike her previous teaching stint at the Catholic kindergarten where students were only exposed to the tenets of the Catholic faith, teacher Y noted that-at BDS students are familiarized with the fundamental principles of the major religions of the world in their religion classes to foster a more ecumenical perspective of spirituality.

In responding to the question on the strengths of the educational environment of BDS, teacher Y observed that students at BDS were generally better behaved than their peers in other

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schools. Students were polite and courteous in their mannerisms and interactions. She added that learning in English at BDS was definitely a contributing factor in improving students' educational potential and developing a more global outlook. On the challenges she faced as a teacher in BDS, teacher Y reflected that the high level of English language proficiency of students meant that she had to improve on her own English competency to ensure better communications with her students. In her lessons, besides imparting subject content matter, she also has to adroitly weave in the teaching of values in her teaching to facilitate students' learning of not only discipline-related knowledge but higher morals as well.

### Teacher A

Teacher A is an American Caucasian in his fifties who is currently teaching English conversation, religious studies and music at primary 1, 2 and 3 levels singing and story-telling at playgroup/kindergarten level as a volunteer. He doesn't have any prior formal teacher training experience and taught for four years as an ashram (Vedic seminary) teacher. His only previous exposure to alternative mediums of instruction was not as a teacher but as a parent when he sent his two children to a Waldorf school for four years. Hence, he was familiar with some of the principles underpinning holistic education due to his previous interactions with the Waldorf educational system where arts and crafts is infused in the teaching of the different disciplinary subjects and there is less preponderance over grades-based assessment. He was also acquainted with the other concepts associated with the Waldorf system such as the less emphasis placed on theoretical rote learning and greater focus on hands-on experiential learning with the same teacher accompanying students through all levels up to 8 grade.

When asked for his views on the differences between traditional education and the holistic education offered by BDS, Teacher A was quick to point out that a wide chasm exists between the two. At BDS, premium is not placed on academic/technical development alone but on a broad-based curricular agenda involving personal, moral, social and spiritual development. The guiding key goal of the educational ethos of BDS is to inspire students to reawaken their higher consciousnesses and become connected with their inner selves. Teacher A explained that while normal schools hone students' skills to improve their employability prospects, students at BDS are primed for more wholesome development including character enhancement and ecological awareness. Students are consciously taught acquire proper manners and mutual respect for fellow human beings and animal species. He pointed out that BDS serves only pure vegetarian food during the school break hours and students are encouraged to say a prayer of thanks to God (Krishna) before consumption of the food. Teacher A observed that the two significant aspects of the curriculum of BDS that differentiates it from others are the dedication exhibited by its teachers towards achieving the holistic educational vision of BDS and the priority given to the spiritual invigoration of its students. During the religion classes that he regularly conducts, an overview of the fundamentals of the beliefs of different major world religions is presented. Questions such as who is God are addressed in a simplified way befitting the young ages of the students. Teacher A mentioned that he also shares with his students the narratives of the life histories of the main characters depicted in popular Vedic epics such as Mahabharata and Ramayana to inspire his students to emulate these saintly personalities and adopt a more noble mind-set.

In elaborating upon the strengths of the educational practices at BDS, teacher A noted that character development was one key deliverable to be achieved in the educational paradigm

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of BDS. Anchored to a God-centric curriculum, teaching is modelled based upon the defining theme of “Keeping God in the Centre”. Prayers are recited by chanting the holy names of God (Hare Krishna Mahamantra), both at the start and end of the day at school to invoke transcendental auspiciousness and create a more conducive environment for learning. Unlike the other schools he has previously liaised with, Teacher A found the teachers at BDS very committed and dedicated in the discharge of their responsibilities - often going above and beyond the normal call of duty and putting in long hours at work in nurturing the kids to their fullest potential. He added that subjects such as mathematics traditionally seen as ‘dry’ and ‘rote-based learning’ are delivered in a less mechanical, more fun-filled manner and the excitement in the classrooms are palpable in the classes by the high energy levels exhibited by both students and teachers.

On the challenges faced in working in the holistic educational system of BDS, Teacher A reflected that one important issue was the larger emotional weight teachers carry in personally tending to each student to nurture his/her growth as a thoughtful individual and dynamic global citizen. This can emotionally be draining for the teachers and take up a lot of their time. On a personal note, Teacher A pointed out that due to the diverse religious backgrounds of the students, he has to constantly be vigilant that discussions in his religion classes are facilitated mindful of the sensitivities involved. He believed that he has acted as a good role model in ensuring that exchanges on religious topics are conducted in a dignified and respectable manner so that no undue tensions between students prescribing to different faiths rise in class.

Teachers M and N

In this interview session, two teachers, M and N, were interviewed simultaneously. Teacher M is in her twenties and has been at BDS for about three years now and has no prior teaching experience. Teacher N who has been at BDS also for about three years has undergone two months of a crash course on basic teacher training and has worked in a few international schools in Jakarta and Bali for the past six years. On the first question on the observed differences between the educational structures of BDS and mainstream schools, Teacher N due to her extensive working experiences in schools was able to provide meaningful comparative insights. She remarked that the curriculum at BDS was far more creative and innovative than those of the schools she had been previously employed with. Essentially, the teaching orientation at BDS is student-centric where the student comes first and the different abilities of students are acknowledged and a variety of ways of instructions employed to accommodate the different learning styles of students. Since two teachers are overseeing classroom proceedings, it is possible to a good degree to segregate students according to their abilities into smaller groups and learning more effectively facilitated within these groups. Teacher M also pointed out that the curriculum at BDS more flexible and empowering unlike those of other schools where curriculum tends to be fixed and static. Similar to what the other teachers interviewed mentioned, Teacher N stated that the emphasis on BDS wasn't solely on academic achievements but in personal grooming and character building. Teachers have to exercise a greater personal touch in their dealings with students and consciously train their students to observe good manners and be at their best behaviours. Teacher M concurred with the views expressed by teacher N and added that one important different in the teaching methods was the stipulation that English is the sole language of instruction at BDS. Teachers were also encouraged to the extent that it would

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practically be possible to use English as the conversational language in communicating with their students, both during and after school hours.

On the strengths of the BDS educational system, Teacher N commented that students are regularly reminded to model exemplary attributes such as being compassionate, spreading love and warmth to others and being kind to animals. She recounted that some parents had told her that their kids had become vegetarians of their own accord after joining the school – a development that was pleasantly surprising to her given that in BDS there is no compulsion to be a vegetarian to be an enrolled student or employed teacher. On the challenges faced in adapting to the alternative educational climate of BDS, Teacher M related that the greatest one lay in raising her own levels of pedagogical competency to better address the learning needs of her students. BDS being a new educational start-up modeled on a Vedic epistemology of education, was the first of its kind in Bali and probably the world as well. Hence, there was no access to samples of successful curriculum design plans implemented elsewhere mirroring similar educational values. In sharing her thoughts on the main challenges she encountered in her classes, teacher N spoke about the constant need to review and reconceptualize instructional methods to ensure teaching is carried out in more personalized and individualized ways to meet the differentiated needs of her students. She added that children in her class were a bit too young to understand or actualize the ideals of Vedantic spirituality – it's too abstract for their young minds to grasp. What they needed were simplified ideas that can be applied more concretely in everyday life. She observed that her students better related to modern fiction-fantasy personalities such as Cinderella and Pinocchio rather than role-model characters such as Dhruva and Pandavas portrayed in Vedic literature.

### **Conclusion**



In summary, the findings of this study indicate that the curriculum at BDS supports, fosters, promotes and develops the following: Children's physical, social, emotional and spiritual well-being; positive attitudes and dispositions towards their learning; social skills by learning to cooperate and work harmoniously and listening to each other; attention skills and persistence; language and communication skills; mathematics and logical thinking skills; knowledge and understanding of the world; and physical and creative development. The focus of the curriculum is on designing pedagogy to be delivered in a nurturing, high-fidelity learning environment meant for educating the whole person. The values imparted to students represent the basis for evaluation of any action or decision taken in any stage of the school's development or management operations. Interviewed teachers felt that they needed more faculty development and training to equip them with the necessary skill-sets and expertise to function competently in a holistic educational environment that is completely new to many of them.

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**Mr Aristotle Motii Nandy** is an educator with more than 10 years' experience working with children from ages 3 to 18. As a student of Dr. T. D. Singh (1937 – 2006), a pioneer in the interface of science and spirituality and member of the United Religions Initiative, Aristotle is focused on introducing spirituality in education, a key component being the search for meaning and purpose through the study of the concepts of life and matter. He believes that true character development can only be achieved with a values-based education paradigm incorporating both scientific principles and spirituality or distilled religious principles, which is deficient in the current reductionistic worldview.

Aristotle also works with teachers and parents on various pedagogical areas such as positive discipline, differentiated instruction and conceptual teaching through inquiry. He is also the founder of SPIRITON RENAISSANCE INTERNATIONAL ([www.spiriton-ri.com](http://www.spiriton-ri.com)), an enterprise aimed at cultivating the human spirit, and can be reached at [aristotlemotii@spiriton-ri.com](mailto:aristotlemotii@spiriton-ri.com).

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