

The **GiFT** *of* **EdUcAtiOn**

Diana Rigg



Past Principal Sr Sheila Sawle used to constantly tell Santa Maria girls, "If it is to be, it is up to me." Thousands of girls took that inspirational advice with them into the world, perhaps none more so than Diana Rigg.

Diana has long been recognised as a force in Australian education. Her business, Promoting Literacy Development (PLD), was named Australian Education Publisher of the Year in 2018 and 2019, despite competition from multinational companies. She has worked with countless students, schools, graduate teachers and Indigenous communities.

Innovation and leadership in education have long been Diana's passion. However, no amount of training or experience could have prepared her for her latest and most ambitious venture. In partnership with the charity Hear Hear for Bhutan and UWA's Emeritus Professor Helen Wildy, Diana is helping to transform education in the tiny nation of Bhutan.

Bhutan is a fledgling nation of 800,000 people. It is largely Buddhist and the students are schooled in Dzongkha and English. It is situated between India and China, two powerful economic and military forces. It has only had three democratic elections so far and is still developing its systems and infrastructure. Diana describes Bhutan as a country with depth. She says, "I'm well-travelled but I've never been to a place like Bhutan. The people are present, they listen, and they are thoughtful." The way they make economic and political decisions is reflective of this mindset.

After a chance meeting with Professor Wildy, Diana agreed to gift the intellectual property of her PLD structured synthetic phonics program to the government of Bhutan. A memorandum of understanding between PLD and the

Bhutanese government was drawn up. In March it was endorsed by the cabinet secretariat and in May 2020, it passed through the parliament to seal it.

Why Bhutan? Surprisingly, there are around 7,000 Bhutanese living in Perth. Many are studying. Despite the numbers of international students, Bhutan struggles with low levels of literacy. An increase in literacy skills would provide opportunities for greater prosperity for the individuals of Bhutan and the country as a whole.

As with many innovative and bold initiatives, the time and work involved only became clear once Diana and her team had embarked on the project. The Bhutanese do speak excellent conversational English, but the processes in place for teaching literacy are problematic. From a publishing point of view, there are very few printing or photocopying resources in the country. In addition, there is a challenge in training teachers nationally to deliver a modern approach to phonics and literacy acquisition. Diana is making use of smartphones and YouTube to deliver training, in order to overcome the extra hurdles caused by limited resources, COVID-19 and the difficult terrain.

Despite the challenges, Diana has set ambitious goals. By the end of 2020 she would like 80% of students in pre-primary (or their first year of schooling) to know their alphabet sounds and be able to sound out simple words. Remember, there can be as many as 45 to 60 students per class.



In 2021 the program will be rolled out to Year 1 students, in 2022 to Year 2 students and in 2023 to Year 3 students. The impact of sustained involvement by the program's creator will be a big factor in the initiative's success.

This journey has already been very rewarding for Diana. She feels that Bhutan has much to teach the West about the delicate balance between happiness, progress and its impact on the environment. Bhutan is the first and only carbon-negative country, absorbing more than six million tonnes of carbon per year. She also admires their philosophy of progressing together as a nation, epitomised by their king living in a log cabin, even though there are grand palaces available.

So, how does a girl from Harvey come to be in a position to change the future of a whole nation? Diana claims that to a degree it is luck. However, she does credit her experiences at Santa Maria College with making her world bigger and broader. She says, "Boarding at Santa Maria was a life opener. I feel very lucky I had those years with Sr Sheila. I had a great opening, expanding opportunity." It is a gift she has passed on generously and compassionately.