

SEMINAR

Education and Development Beyond Human Capital: Bhutan and the Case for Happiness in Education

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Waseda University

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Key Arguments:

- The Bhutanese development philosophy of Gross National Happiness (GNH) is a promising framework for educational development.
- Bhutan, like many other countries around the world, is challenged by a misalignment of educational values and cultures across policy and practice.
- Based on our data and analysis from Bhutan, we argue that 21st century schools around the world need to not only focus on competency and skill development, but also on the development of the whole child to advance a happier and more sustainable society.

Abstract:

Since the establishment of the modern Bhutanese state in 1907, Bhutanese society has undergone vast changes in a relatively short amount of time. Formalized education only began in earnest in the 1960s, and the last sixty years has also seen the creation of money and a capitalist economy, written language, democracy, and a secular universal health system. The implementation of secular education and the firm embrace of universal basic education – enshrined in the Bhutanese constitution – has had vast consequences in a country that previously had a formal Buddhist monastic education system for only a small percentage of its population for nearly 1,000 years.

Today, Bhutan is perhaps best known for its development philosophy of Gross National Happiness (GNH). In the Bhutanese educational system, GNH is very influential in policy. However, GNH is poorly understood and implemented in practice. There is a significant misalignment of values across the Bhutanese education system, as so much of classroom pedagogical practice and curricular guidance is formed by other socio-cultural values in education. Namely, the experience in the Bhutanese classroom is informed by an achievement and examination culture of winners and losers; a didactic, teacher-centered model learned and influenced by its South Asian neighbors as a lasting export of Colonial Britain.

In this seminar, we will share the results of two years of fieldwork in Bhutan in which we conducted focus groups and ethnographic observations in 20 schools across 10 districts in Bhutan. This project – funded by the Toyota Foundation – sought out the voices of students and teachers in highlighting their own experiences and educational narratives. Our data represents the perspective of over 200 students and teachers. We analyzed our data using grounded coding and analysis.

The results of our project found that educational values misalignment occurred at all levels of the school experience. The discourse of ‘21st century skills’ has become a symbol of ‘modern education’ in Bhutan, but teachers reported that they could never realize these aspirations because of curricular restrictions and lack of support from school leadership. They were frequently disincentivized from moving beyond the prescribed curriculum and were constrained within high-stakes examination preparation. This is a far cry from the intention of Bhutanese education policy, with an ‘Education for GNH’ initiative that stresses the balance of ‘Head, Heart, Hands, and Home’ and nine student attributes that includes ‘spirituality and character’ and ‘family, community, and national values’ amongst them.

Values such as sustainability and inclusion are built into this framework. Educational curriculum and classroom pedagogy run counter to these aspirations the majority of the time.

During the student focus groups, we often had lengthy conversations on what it means to be an 'educated person' in Bhutanese society, as well as the purpose of going to school in modern Bhutanese society. Based on our thematic analysis, students believed that education would help them support Bhutanese society, but often found disjuncture between what they learned at school and what they learned from older generations at home. The students' version of an 'educated person' was most often one of white-collar work that was far different than most of their parents, and yet even those skills were not being valued throughout the system. These beliefs also ignore an unfortunate economic reality in Bhutan in which these types of jobs are becoming much fewer, but the educational narrative of social and economic progress is very strong – doing well in school means doing well in life. Students in Bhutanese schools are, in essence, 'betwixt and between' the past and the future, and gaining little in terms of educational utility.

Despite the rather negative findings on the misalignment of educational values across the Bhutanese educational system, these findings also promote how education systems can be better aligned by identifying the complex factors and domains that comprise it. Rather than think about education systems as a series of input and outputs, this research suggests that we need to analyze education as a complex system in which multiple factors must be considered in relation to each other. Bhutan has a clearly progressive and holistic set of educational policies, and yet other socio-cultural, economic, and political complexities interact with each other to produce something other than the policy's intent.

This paper and its findings embrace and advances anthropologic studies of policy and practice, such as the notions of policy enactment, policy appropriation, and policy assemblage, for example. These ideas – while valid and observable – all focus attention on actors producing and/or resisting policies in various means and forms. They take for granted that it is all part of the 'policy process', and that everyone is a 'policy actor' situated within 'nested contexts'. However, what we advance is that students and teachers operate more on a basis of systemic incentives and disincentives, and within their own education value-narrative frameworks and not necessarily as a sole response to the policy itself. In our case, Bhutanese policy and educational values on GNH are fully and warmly accepted by students and teachers alike, but the actual practices in schools do not align themselves with these values. Teachers are not resistant to the policy. Rather, *policy is resistant to the teachers*.

Ultimately, the take away from this research is that educational values, narratives, and outcomes do not exist in isolation; nor do policies and policy actors have a purely instrumentalist relationship. We argue that educational values such as sustainability, inclusion, and Gross National Happiness must be treated as systemic and complex; and attention must be paid in terms of how targeted educational values are taught, enacted, conveyed, and practiced throughout the education system.