

Educating for Happiness

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Introduction

What is educating for happiness? It is certainly not cerebral studying of the four pillars, the nine domains, and the 72 plus indicators of Gross National Happiness (GNH). But many people may intuitively refer to the domains and pillars of GNH on encountering the above question. My doctoral research on conceptions of happiness grounded in the realities of urban youth (Lhamu, 2018) reveals that educating for happiness is much more than the current centrally determined concept of GNH. The study points to a chasm between Bhutan's educational vision of educating for happiness and the realities of the schools.

The goal of my research on youth conceptions of happiness was to contribute to realising the ideals of GNH. The premise of the research was that, for the ideals of educating for happiness to translate into everyday life, the conception of happiness must be grounded in the lived experiences of youth. An externally imposed conception would make little sense in the absence of philosophical resonance and disconnect with the realities of youth experiences (Schneider, 2014). Youth is also a complex stage of human development with unique challenges and opportunities. Rapid physical and cognitive development (Eryilmaz, 2012) marks the stage. Defiance of authority and norms, gravitation towards peer influences, and heightened exploration and formation of identity (Meeus, Iedema, Helsén, & Vollebergh, 1999; Waterman, 1982) mark the characteristics of youth. Hence, I contend that the understandings of happiness gleaned from centrally defined notions cannot be uncritically applied to youth. The nature of social context, priorities and needs vary across life's stages and so may their forms and effects on happiness (Kroll, 2014).

There are two interrelated questions that remain critical to the agenda of educating for happiness: i) What does happiness mean to youth? ii) How do schools serve youth happiness? My inquiry into youth happiness sheds light on complex conceptions of happiness. I discuss one of the constructs

of happiness in this article – happiness as realising one’s potentials – and extend on the policy recommendations for holistic curricula and agency as the bedrock of educating for youth happiness.

The Centrally Constructed Notion of Happiness

Bhutan launched “Educating for Happiness” towards the end of 2009 with an international conference attended by educators, academics and intellectuals from both within and outside Bhutan. The GNH paradigm that proposes to balance socio-economic, cultural and environmental conservation (Thinley, 2009; Ura, Alkire, Zangmo, & Wangdi, 2012) serve as the founding philosophy underpinning the educating for happiness agenda. As envisioned under this initiative, the educational goals are to:

- Develop the understanding of reality as an interconnected whole;
- Nurture predispositions that are caring and respectful of self, others, nature, and culture;
- Develop right attitude and competencies to deal effectively with change and increasing materialism; and
- Help youth make right choices of livelihood and participate in community engagements (Hayward & Colman, 2010).

Even a cursory analysis reveals that the above educational goals are heavily imbued with Buddhist existential belief of interdependence, and that mind training and ethical groundings are promulgated as approaches to abiding happiness. Perhaps, given the subjectivities and fluidity around the concept of happiness, Bhutan takes an imprecise stance and does not explicate what happiness means in definitive terms in any of its policy documents. Taking an ethical stance and Buddhist approach, Thinley, (2009, p. 6), comes close to furnishing an official definition of happiness. He asserts, “happiness is not fleeting, pleasurable ‘feel good’ moods.” He argues that “... true abiding happiness cannot exist while others suffer, and comes only from serving others, living in harmony with nature, and realising our innate wisdom and the true and brilliant nature of our own minds.” This, however, is a partial attempt; the emphasis continues to be on what it is not and what one ought to pursue (harmony, wisdom, taming the mind) to attain happiness without clearly stating what it is. Given the strong influence of Buddhist philosophy on the GNH paradigm and educating for happiness agenda, it is safe to surmise that the centrally defined happiness is a state of mind characterised

by tranquillity, calmness and contentment. The onus of its attainment lies with the individuals; and the pursuit of it is an inward journey rather than comforts, security, and satisfaction from external sources.

Flow: the State of Youth Happiness

Interviews with high school students in my research reveal happiness as a state of complete engrossment in an activity that matches their potentials and interests. When asked to describe the happy state, most youth relate those moments to doing an activity that they are interested in and have the talent or the aptitude for. Their descriptions of such a state include – being engaged and engrossed, forgetting the world outside and occupying a different figurative world, feeling free and having no interrupting thoughts arising, and feeling great or satisfied afterwards. Such descriptions of the state of happiness correspond closely with Csikzenthmihilya’s (1997) concept of flow -- intense engagement in a challenging activity that optimally utilizes one’s potentials and competencies, and that encompasses a loss of consciousness of self and of time. Similarly, it concurs with Seligman’s (2011) proposition that activities that optimally use one’s strengths enhance happiness.

Happiness as a state of flow resulting from harmony between one’s potential and demands of an activity of interest points to the challenges of schools in catering to youth happiness particularly when the school curricula is centrally determined and is highly exam-oriented. If the agenda of educating for happiness were to be taken with seriousness, happiness as “flow” ought to provide students with experiences that allow self-discovery and employment of their strengths (interests, abilities and potentials) in activities that optimally challenge them. However, my research points to curricular realities of the school in discord with the educational goals and the youth conception of happiness as realising their potentials.

The Freedom for Choice and Voice – Preconditions for Youth Happiness point to freedom of choice and voice in academic learning and wider experiences as important preconditions of happiness. The freedom of choice in co-curricular programmes gives much happiness while limited student voice and choice in academics curtail similar experiences.

Co-curricular programmes add to the variety of youth developmental contexts. It broadens the opportunity for them to experience a sense of competence that is important for their self-esteem. School clubs, concerts, and sports, when given the autonomy to choose on their own, serve as a context in which the youth can explore and nurture their potentials and express themselves as competent dancers, singers, or athletes. In pursuing their interests, youth get to assess themselves more favourably outside of the stringent academic standards of the school. Because of this validation, they experience a sense of competence that has a positive effect on their self-esteem.

Co-curricular programmes as a source of happiness lies in the fact that the youth enjoy certain level of autonomy (freedom) to choose as well as determine the activities for themselves, which in other words means “agency”. The freedom to choose and decide for themselves increases the likelihood of finding a better match of the activities with their interest and potential which, in turn, increases the prospect of good performance and engrossment.

Co-curricular programmes in the Bhutanese education system are traditionally intended to complement the overall goals of the prescribed curriculum. Club activities are supposed to be organised on a weekly basis, and they are expected to allow for exploration of interests outside the prescribed academic curriculum. However, this research suggests that the youth find their school experiences narrowly focused on academics over which they have no autonomy or influence and school clubs are often sacrificed for academics.

All the research participants value academic performance but they also report that overemphasis on academics stifles their happiness. Alluding to the monotony of studies and lamenting limited opportunities that cater to their nonacademic interests, a participant said: “school is literally kind of a hell-type-of-feeling because all we have to do is study, study, study.” Another participant upset with school management for thwarting a student-led project to build a stupa as his batch’s legacy said, “we have a lot of talented people... and their talents are killed by education sometimes... they do not get the platform.” Similarly, another student claims, “Academics is not the only thing that is important to students, they need to learn

something different.” The youth disgruntled for stalling his stupa project claims: “What we have forgotten is that there are people who have more talent in other things than education [sic]...a great singer might be dying living [working] in office, but we don’t see that because we are all diverted towards education.”

Consistent with Aristotle’s eudaimonic notion of happiness (Huta & Ryan, 2011; Waterman, Schwartz, & Conti, 2006), the participants’ accounts strongly indicate the realisation of their full potentials, variously defined, as equating with happiness for them. But the narrow academic curriculum, pointed out as a happiness constraint in this research, leaves no room for other pursuits that are equally important in life. A narrow emphasis on academics restrains the youth from exploring potentials and realising capabilities. What the school values is what is examinable and examined; rest of the important life skills – self-directedness, independent planning, organising groups, mobilising resources, and so on - are on the fringes of school curricula.

An education system that expects everyone to excel on narrowly defined academic standards and provide limited choices is unfair for a diverse group of students who may come with different talents, interests, and abilities, and is a detriment to their happiness. Education for happiness ought to give the freedom and autonomy to explore latent interests, bring out the best in each individual, and value life skills and knowledge not in the academic curriculum of the schools.

Revisiting Education Goals

Tracing the original ideas behind education in Latin as “educare” and “educere” (Brass & Good, 2004), education includes continuation of already accumulated knowledge and preparation for the unknown world and realisation of potentials.

As is apparent from the youth’s narratives the purpose of education is of paramount significance in relation to the educating for happiness agenda. Evidently, nurturing of potentials is an important educational goal facilitated by social conditions of freedom to voice and choice (agency). In coherence with this conception of happiness, Noddings (2012a) contends that a good education system aiming to promote happiness should prepare

students for “things that all students should know and be able to do” but also should “help them discover what they might want to do... and evaluate their own aptitude in an area of choice” (p. 778).

The qualities of a GNH graduate (Ministry of Education, n.d) lays out a comprehensive set of ethical standards in all spheres of life beyond the economic domain. It includes descriptions of how a graduate should be as an individual, a family member, an employee or a colleague, a community member, and a citizen. What these goals imply is an educational experience that nurtures not just academic and intellectual abilities but gives equal status to socio-emotional, ethical, and spiritual nourishment. While this holistic development goal of education seems to share some resonance with youths’ expectations of the school, the autonomy of students to influence the content and learning processes are constrained by centrally determined narrow curricula with heavy emphasis on academic performance. Youth’s notion of happiness as realising their potentials calls for a deliberation on a number of questions related to school curricula and pedagogy, teacher preparation, and school culture and so on.

Curricular Implications of “Happiness as Realising Potentials”

Based on the findings of youth conception of happiness as realising their potentials, I furnish two inter-related recommendations in materialising happiness goal into a reality: holistic curriculum and agency in education.

a. Holistic curricula - Balancing academic and non-academic goals

Culture and social contexts shape human values and aspirations, however, diversity is natural as personal experiences and presuppositions equally influence human development (Crotty, 2010). Students come with multiple and diverse interests and potentials; some with greater academic inclination while others find their strengths in creative fields of performing arts, sports, culinary, construction and interpersonal relations. Heavily academic oriented education system is not only unfair but can be crippling because it forces students to excel in fields that lay outside of their continuum of strengths and interests.

Holistic education includes attending to socio-emotional and ethical development (Cohen, 2006; Noddings, 2003) as from cognitive preparation. Bhutan's educational goals (Ministry of Education, n.d) reflects similar intent but, there is a discrepancy between espoused holistic educational goals and curricular practices. Holistic educational goals cohere with the students' desires for wholesome development and to realise what they view to be their potentials, but the school curriculum limits that growth. The social, cognitive and emotional learning outcomes, invisible and nebulous to many, are often overlooked and undervalued compared to academic achievements.

As discussed earlier, co-curricular programmes contribute to youth happiness but are regarded less important in Bhutanese schools. The understanding that non-academic curricula expand the developmental contexts of the youth wherein they hone socio-emotional skills, explore latent potentials, develop cognitive skills, cultivate self-directedness, and develop positive self-esteem is not evident from the treatment of co-curricular activities in Bhutanese schools. Perhaps this awareness was lost over the years as the education system became highly examined -- examined on textbook contents.

The debate on “educare” (to transmit tried and tested knowledge and practices) and “educere” (to bring out the best in preparation for an unknown future) goals of education (Brass & Good, 2004) is relevant now in discussion. The former goal presupposes the containment of all knowledge, wisdom and practices in textbooks and the predictability of future. The latter, on the other hand, recognises the future as unknown and therefore the need to nurture competencies such as analytical, critical and creative minds. Considering the interconnectedness of the world and rapid pace of change more now than ever due to technological advancement, it calls for a balance of “educare and educere” goals of education lest we produce future citizens who are high achievers in tests, but are ill prepared to cope with today's fast-changing world.

Balancing educational goals means more than the obvious equal division of instructional hours between academic and non-academic learning. A holistic development goal of education is best achieved through the right choice of instructional approaches. An intentionally organised learning taken beyond textbooks and classrooms, and connected with messiness

of the real world nurtures a complex set of skills and values aside from theoretical conceptual understanding. For instance, how can one teach youth a sense of “belongingness” to their community? Cerebral teaching leads to high examination scores and superficial compliance bereft of genuine application. One way to do it is by facilitating experiential learning that helps them connect and learn more about their community, know the people, explore things that they may value, and discover those issues that they can play a role in improving. The time is ripe, if not late, for the Bhutanese education system to review and revamp its curricula, assess its relevancy, currency, and alignment with its visionary goals.

b. Agency – Voice and Choice in Education

The findings of my study relate to the well-established postulation of self-determinism theory that satisfaction of the need for autonomy or a sense of agency (the other two being competence and relatedness) (Ryan & Deci, 2000) is central to youth happiness. Environments where students enjoy agency - freedom of choice and voice - enhances the likelihood of finding an engaging activity and, as discussed earlier, complete engrossment in an activity that optimally utilises their strengths is what youth describe as their state of happiness.

Aside from the much-needed curricular diversification to provide wider choices, the pedagogical approaches and school administration need democratisation to realise the goal of educating for happiness. The education system’s continuing efforts in making learning processes student-centered need renewed emphasis with deeper understanding of how autonomy and freedom relate to youth well-being. It is imperative that educators and administrators alike understand the links between student agency, school engagement, and the happiness agenda to appreciate the value of student-centered approaches. Indeed the benefits of supportive school environment extend beyond happiness to higher engagement and learning outcomes (Christopher & Ryan, 2009).

For a traditionally hierarchical culture, the notions of youth agency can be discomforting as it disrupts the status quo of those in positions of authority as knowledgeable and wise beings. One could argue that if happiness is realisation of one’s potentials, then individuals are the best judges of their interests; the schools (and teachers) need only create environments

conducive for youth exploration and discovery of their latent talents and strengths within reasonable and safe boundaries. The centrality of the freedom to voice and choice reiterates the supposition that pedagogic approaches that values learner experience, engagement, and autonomy is conducive to youth happiness in school. Critical pedagogy, an emerging pedagogical approach (Aliakbar & Faraji, 2011; Diaz-Greenberg & Nevin, 2004), becomes relevant to the discussion here. Critical pedagogy invites learners to reject uncritical acceptance of knowledge or ways of life as a given, and to critically reflect on it and exercise one's voice to engage in critical dialogue (Diaz-Greenberg & Nevin, 2004). Such a pedagogical approach removes teachers from the position of subject experts and elevates learners to co-creators of knowledge (Aliakbar & Faraji, 2011). It is likely, given the importance of agency to youth happiness, that adoption of such a pedagogical approach, that solicits and values youth voice, may be conducive to the educating for happiness agenda.

Conclusion

The bottom-up approach to understanding youth's conceptions of happiness is very revealing for Bhutan's education system. Youth's notion of happiness transcends the four pillars and domains of Gross National Happiness. A state of happiness for youth include a feeling of flow wherein they zoom into a mental environment created by engagement with an activity that they enjoy performing and have the potential for. In relation to this description of the state of happiness, realisation of potentials and the freedom to exercise voice and choice are social environments that promote youth happiness.

If Bhutan is serious about educating future citizens to enjoy better chances at happiness, curricular and pedagogical reformations that require strong political will and a longer term vision that extends beyond five-year term of political governments are imperative. There is a need to relook at the school curriculum and pedagogy to assess their coherence with the broad educational goals for happiness. Happiness cannot be taught directly, but the school culture (curricula, pedagogy and the administrative policy and rules) needs to be infused with values (freedom of voice and choice, autonomy) that promote youth happiness, and the purpose of education ought to transcend academic excellence alone to help youth realise what they are capable of.

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