

Unintended Forces That Shape Youth Values

A Theoretical Analysis of the Implicit Messages in the Structure and Processes of School Education Shaping Youth Development

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Introduction

Disappointments with youth are aplenty. They range from concerns about their values and attitudes to viewing them as a group to be wary of as drug abusers and gangsters. These are common themes when the topic of youth comes up in formal and informal conversations. Employers find it difficult to find employees with the right kind of skills¹. A common remark is that young people nowadays abhor so-called “blue-collar” jobs and choose to remain unemployed rather than dirty their hands on a farm or a construction site to make a living. With increasing fallow land in the villages and large import of so-called “skilled workers” from India, coupled with a paradoxical high youth unemployment rate of 10.7 percent², one cannot help but wonder if there is any truth in this remark.

Parents lament increasing competition and shrinking opportunities for jobs (in most instances they mean a desk job). Many worry about losing their children to depression, substance abuse, prostitution, and bars. In all these rants, youth are often portrayed as the culprits.

But how honestly do we reflect on the kind of environment the young people are in? The environment and activities, experienced in school and within the family, are organised and influenced by adults. One may argue that youth exercise personal agency and can autonomously choose certain values and attitudes over others. But the proposal here is to honestly reflect on how we organise their learning experiences and see if we hold them to expectations different from what schools teach them, implicitly and unintentionally. My argument is that, hidden in the curriculum and the education structure, are messages that we implicitly value or undervalue but are not consciously aware of as educators and policymakers.

^{1,2}Ministry of Labour and Human Resources, (2015). *Labour Force Survey*

An Ecological Perspective of Youth Development

Youth do not develop in a vacuum but are embedded within various developmental contexts³. Exerting indirect yet significant influence on them are the socio-political and economic contexts in which they live. Now, with increasing connectedness in the world and advancement in Information Communication Technologies, the larger virtual context shaping the young is the force of globalisation. Within the immediate environment, family, peers, school and the community contexts shape their development. Of these settings, school is the place where youth spend most of their time. Most structured learning takes place in the school environment. However, they absorb much more than what is explicitly offered in the school curriculum. School leadership, culture, teacher personalities and subjectivities all influence them in ways that aren't always obvious.

Youth themselves are not passive in their development. There is a dialectical relationship between the individual and the external developmental contexts. As conscious beings, they do not accept all the social norms and values of the various environments they are embedded in. Rather they also draw on their prior experience and personal presuppositions to choose from the contexts⁴.

The Meaning of Education

The word “education” originates from two Latin words—“educare” and “educere”. The former means to “mould” or train and the latter means to “lead out”⁵. By the former definition, the purpose of education is to preserve and transmit knowledge and wisdom so that it is carried forth by the new generation. Thus, education is to promote memorisation of and training in already accumulated knowledge and skills. Defined as “leading out”, the goal of education is to prepare learners for the unknown future and to help them realise all potentials. Understood thus, education is to promote critical thinking, creativity and skills of inquiry. Bhutan’s conception of education, as evidenced from its vision (discussed in the following paragraph), is a combination of the two concepts. But, as I outline in this article, one would question if the two goals of education are well-balanced.

³Bronfenbrenner, U. (1994). Ecological models of human development. *International Encyclopaedia of Education*. Vol 3. 2nd ed. Oxford: Elsevier

⁴Mathews, G. (2012). Happiness, culture, and context. *International Journal of Wellbeing*, 2(4), 299-312.

Moses, J., & Knutsen, T. (2007). *Ways of Knowing: Competing methodologies in social and political research*. NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

⁵Bass, R.V & Good, J.W. (2004). Educare and Educere: Is a balance possible in the educational system? *The Educational Forum*. Vol 68, 161-168

Bhutan's National Education Vision

As a country championing the philosophy of Gross National Happiness (GNH), the kind of high school graduate we envision, in a nutshell, is a good human being who is compassionate, moral, productive and wise. The proceedings from the first ever “Educating for Gross National Happiness” conference in 2009 led the nation to a consensus that schools will develop youth with the knowledge of reality as an interconnected whole and that they will be compassionate beings with the values and skills to deal with changing contexts, to choose right livelihood, and be productive citizens⁶. Supporting this vision, the Education Ministry reiterates that the objective of school education is to realise the national goal of GNH⁷.

But is the school curriculum designed to support such a vision? Do the processes of learning in our schools support the acquisition of such holistic knowledge? Do the priorities of school education cohere with the idea of preparing youth to choose right livelihood and to deal effectively with a change that is unknown?

In the following section, I argue that the school system is promoting a tunnel vision of education by focusing on academics to the neglect of other values essential for grooming good and productive citizens. By holding everyone to one yardstick of academics, I argue that the education system implicitly devalues vocational education and skilled work to the detriment of the socialisation of youth. And by analysing the current process of teaching and learning, I illustrate how it unintentionally undermines the development of critical, creative and original thinking in youth, promoting instead, compliance, passivity and uniformity in thought.

The Narrow Conception of Education

Let's start with the curriculum structure of Bhutan's school system. What is evident is its narrow focus on traditional subjects like mathematics, sciences, languages, history, geography, economics, commerce, computer science and so on. Lack of diversity was an issue that the erstwhile Royal Education Council attempted to address about a decade ago through the introduction of a diversified curriculum within the new National Curriculum Framework. The larger social, economic and political contexts have changed, but the choices that the school system offers remain limited for students to pursue their interests and aptitudes. Where are sociology, psychology, political science, journalism, music and performing arts, vocational courses and so

⁶Hayward, K., & Colman, R. (2010). *Educating for Gross National Happiness Workshop: 7-12 December 2009*. Thimphu: Ministry of Education.

⁷Ministry of Education, (2015). *Annual Education Statistics*.

on at the higher secondary level? There remains much to be desired in the diversity of the current school curriculum.

In principle, schools offer programmes such as visual arts and craft, music, health and population studies, games and sports, moral and value education, scouts and socially useful and productive works (agriculture, forestry, vocational courses) according to the Ministry of Education's 2015 Annual Statistics document. These programmes are supposed to complement the learning objectives of traditional subjects. But how serious and how well these programmes are organised is questionable. For instance, consider the time devoted to clubs. There is but one period for clubs in a week and, as I found in my youth research, it is often the one sacrificed for remedial classes or mass cleaning of the school campus in the name of socially useful and productive work (SUPW). When such practices become the norm, it tells youth that what they learn outside of what is prescribed and tested isn't important—that what counts is performance in academics.

A surprising revelation at the National Curriculum Review (2016) was that the Ministry of Education's programme on life-skills education, like the clubs, is given a step-motherly treatment, left up to the teachers' ingenuity to find the time for it within the tight school schedule. The message is clear—the priority is to produce academically high achievers and all other skills like emotional resilience, listening, empathy and so on that life-skills programmes teach are secondary to it. Apparently, quality education doesn't extend to the social and emotional health of youth. Such a narrow focus on academic subjects persists although common sense tells us that academic achievement is just one aspect of education. Equally important is to nurture the kind of values and skills that make one a productive member of society, one who is socio-emotionally healthy and academically sound.

The Watertight Compartmentalisation of Education Tracks

To the argument I raised above about the lack of diversity in curriculum, one may counter that there are vocational training institutes, now called Technical Training Institutes (TTIs), to cater to vocational interests. But TTIs already suffer from poor status, with lower pay and demanding work environment being some of the discouraging factors. More importantly, the fact that vocational courses are not a part of the electives in the general education system, but are a track that one moves to upon failing to meet the academic aggregate required for tertiary education, is detrimental to the appeal of vocational programmes⁸.

⁸Ministry of Labour and Human Resources, (2015). *Labour Force Survey*.

The flaw lies in an education structure that compartmentalises academic and vocational tracks. There is no lateral transfer between the two tracks based on interest and aptitude but only on academic score. The electives in the general education system do not include vocational courses, yet the academic score in Class 10 is the accepted proxy for vocational aptitude. The unintended consequence is that such an erroneous indicator lowers the value and prestige of vocational education in the eyes of youth. It results in labeling of those in the vocational track as “drop-outs” or “failures” from the general education system. The TTIs then become the “training ground for the residues” from the general education system, according to a former official from the Ministry of Labour and Human Resources (MoLHR).

Can the system not offer a range of electives so that students get to explore their interests and choose streams based on their aptitude rather than academic score? Those who choose the Arts stream are not considered any less than those in the Commerce or Science streams because the system allows choice based on their competence in the respective subjects. Can it not be the same for vocational courses?

The Predominance of Assessment *of* Learning

There is more than one purpose to assessment in education. The most common use is to judge the level of achievement in expected learning outcomes. This kind of assessment is either called summative assessment or “assessment *of* learning”. Assessments are also embedded within the teaching process to improve learning and this type is commonly called formative or “assessment *for* learning”. But rarely used is “assessment *as* learning”. The kind of assessment a system predominantly uses has implications for the kind of learning outcomes youth come to value. In this section, I discuss the practices of assessment in Bhutan and the unintended learning the youth draw from it.

No matter how visionary the conception of education is theoretically, the practices of assessment drive what youth come to value. Bhutan’s education system is heavily exam-oriented—emphasising assessment *of* learning. The purpose is to rank and promote or detain students. The examination is indeed a necessary part of education. However, within this assessment practice, there is a bias towards content knowledge. Being the easiest to quantify and measure, content knowledge is what the examination system predominantly measures. Consequently, content knowledge is what the students come to value more than skills and values.

^{9,10}Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth, (2009). *Rethinking classroom assessment with purpose in mind*.

Having taught in the education system at both the school and college levels, I observed that what gets tested gains value in the eyes of parents and students. Hence, sadly, the domain of value, which is the most elusive to quantify and measure, is often forgotten in teachers' lessons and assessment. I do not suggest that we rank students on a continuum and award those with the highest score in values. That would be self-defeating. But is there a way in which we can balance the various purposes of education? Education is not just about producing intellectuals but those with values that contribute to a progressive and harmonious society.

Assessment *for* learning requires teachers to embed assessment in the process of teaching, using it to inform their strategies and instructions with the goal of assisting the student in learning better. Rarely are assessments used as learning. "Assessment as learning" is premised on the notion that "learning is an active process of cognitive restructuring"¹⁰. From this view, students' involvement in their learning and engaging in reflective processes is imperative. Self-reflection on what they are thinking and feeling in the cognitive and affective domains makes their thoughts and emotions evident and accessible to self-monitoring, self-assessment and self-direction. Such uses of assessment promote self-awareness, self-directedness and independence.

In Bhutanese schools, students are rarely engaged in self-assessment or thinking about their thinking. There are a number of constraints that are beyond the scope of this article. But the reality is, it is always the teachers who, as the authority on the subject, assess and evaluate students. Such a practice precludes students from the process of assessment and robs them of the opportunity to develop the critical skills of self-reflection, self-awareness and self-monitoring. Instead, it teaches youth to wait for an external authority to validate their learning and to direct them.

The Practice of "Sage on the Stage"

In the world of work, prospective employers look for critical thinkers, self-directed, good problem-solvers, and those able to adapt to situations. Such skills develop in youth when the learning environment encourages them to think differently, question critically, and approach problems creatively. But the didactic pedagogical approach of "sage on the stage"¹¹ stumps development of such skills. There is minimal interaction amongst students and between teacher and students. The orientation of the learning spaces and the crammed classrooms discourage collaborative group work and interactions. It is predominantly a teacher-centric approach to education with teachers dispensing knowledge from textbooks.

¹⁰Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth, (2009). *Rethinking classroom assessment with purpose in mind*.

¹¹Discovery & Royal Education Council, (2009). *Quality of school education in Bhutan: Reality and Opportunities*.

In such an environment, students are deprived of the opportunity to voice their perspectives, challenge each other's ideas, hear differing points of views, solve problems, think creatively and work collaboratively. Such an approach to teaching reinforces passive absorption of information and uncritical compliance with the knowledge of the figure of authority, however inadequate or flawed. Students fear to think differently or voice a different perspective, and it stumps creative and original thinking. But upon graduating, the adult world holds them to standards that were not adequately encouraged within the school system.

From morning until the end of the school day, except for breaks in between, and throughout the entire school year, teachers and students are confined to the four walls of the classroom. Rarely are students taken on organised field trips to parks to learn about ecology and environment, or out into the community to learn from elders about local history, or to a construction site to observe applications of mathematical concepts in practice.

When learning is thus confined, it betrays the erroneous assumption embedded in the education system that learning happens only within the walls of the school and not "out there". It gives students the false notion that what the textbooks contain is worth more than what they can learn experientially from the wider world. When an artificial line separates the school from the rest of the social world, it is enticing for teachers to teach to test and for students to aim for good exam scores alone. And understandably so, as in the end, both teachers and students are judged by the system based on their exam scores alone. Such temptations, when learning is confined to books and the school, defeat the purpose of education as preparation for life and the unknown future.

The Visible Absence of the Others

It isn't typical for schools in Bhutan to open up to experts in the community in the first place. Secondly, the most common and often viewed as the only authoritative resources, are the teachers and the textbooks. On rare occasions, schools invite guest speakers with various objectives. Often, it is to create awareness on social issues, sometimes to complement classroom learning with an expert's view on a topic, and at times to offer career options and role models.

Regardless of the intended objectives of the school, such opportunities to interact with resources other than teachers help youth explore their interests, motivations and aspirations in life, supporting them in clarifying their interests, choice of

tertiary education programmes and career goals. Most preferred guests are *Dashos*, doctors, lawyers, engineers, bureaucrats and writers—in essence, those associated with academic achievement. Visibly absent are equally productive citizens of society such as artists, goldsmiths, sculptors, farmers, weavers, plumbers, bricklayers, woodworkers, *thanka* painters, filmmakers, chefs, bakers and so on. Such a choice of guest speakers in the school reinforces the value that the education system and the society place on academics and the social status associated with academic achievement. Consequently, youth learn to regard everything else as less desirable and of less value than academics and becoming a bureaucrat, lawyer, engineer or a *Dasho*.

Conclusion

In no way can the school system scrap the academic focus of education or dispense with examinations completely. But if the system is to realise the grand vision of education as preparation for life and its ever-changing contexts, it is imperative to review how practices in school concur with that vision. More importantly, we need to reflect on and mindfully address the paradoxes inherent in the education structure, curriculum and processes of teaching and learning in schools. For a vibrant economy, knowledge and skills of all kinds—academic and non-academic—are important. Equally important are values that guide youth in solving problems and making decisions and choices in life.

However, the education system gives more weight to academic over non-academic skills and values, as evidenced by the curriculum and the time devoted to various subjects or programmes. The system inherently accords higher status to academic subjects over vocational training, and the educational experience teaches youth to be passive, compliant and uncritical. Yet the responsibilities that youth are expected to fulfill as future leaders and citizens require them to be otherwise.