

Cultural Intersection and Education: A Case Study of Identity Formation of Bhutanese Children Living in Perth, Australia

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Abstract

This paper examines the navigation of cultural identity among Bhutanese children living in Perth, Australia, amidst growing community concerns regarding the potential erosion of traditional values and roots in the diaspora.

Utilising a dialogical, collaborative, autoethnographic approach, the study analyses the engagement and creative expressions of Bhutanese child migrants in Australia (aged 8-15) during an “Ideal Community Model-Making” activity at Drukyl Camp 2024.

Through the reflexive lens of two Bhutanese migrant researchers, the paper reveals a complex process of identity negotiation, in which children actively integrate Australian pedagogical competencies, such as critical thinking and agency, with deeply rooted Bhutanese cultural themes, challenging the binary narrative of cultural loss.

The paper suggests that rather than experiencing cultural erasure, these children are forging a resilient, hybrid transnational identity. These insights advocate for a nuanced understanding of diasporic childhood that recognises children’s agency in identity construction, with implications for parenting and community initiatives that support successful cultural negotiation.

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Introduction

With over 280 million migrants globally (Menozzi, 2021), international migration has intensified scholarly attention on sociocultural changes, primarily through the lens of cultural erosion (Bacchus, 2020). Concerns resonate intensely within Eastern diasporic communities, where elders frequently voice anxieties about younger generations becoming “unruly” or disconnected from core values such as respect, familial duty and spiritual traditions (Jakubowicz et al., 2014).

Such issues, involving intergenerational conflict and identity fragmentation, are particularly pronounced within the Australian context, a nation profoundly shaped by immigration (Ansari & Winsler, 2014; Cohen, 2004; Gatwiri & Anderson, 2021; Naidoo, 2007; Radford & Hetz, 2021; Zajda, 2009).

The Bhutanese diaspora, as one of the fastest-growing immigrant groups in Australia (Pelden et al., 2024), offers a compelling case to explore. Statistics show exponential growth in the number of Bhutanese migrants in Australia over the last 10 years, forming significant communities in cities such as Perth (Alaref et al., 2025).

This rapid migration has ignited profound anxieties among Bhutanese elders. According to Pelden et al. (2024), they express deep fears that younger generations will lose the communal values that are the cornerstone of Bhutanese identity.

It is against this backdrop of community anxiety and scholarly discourse that initiatives such as Perth’s Drukyul Camp emerged in 2024 (Rabten, 2024). The camp was organised by a group of former Bhutanese educators, in collaboration with the Association of Bhutanese in Perth (ABPI), to strengthen cultural identity among Bhutanese youth.

This intensive two-week programme, held between December, 2024 and January, 2025, engaged 150 children. The camp offered structured activities centred around teaching Dzongkha (Bhutan’s national language), traditional dress (*gho/kira*), history, and *driglam namzha* (Bhutanese etiquette). Drukyul Camp thus provided a vital site for examining identity negotiation through an ethnographic lens.

This paper analyses how Bhutanese child migrants (aged 8–15) enrolled in the Drukyl Camp in Perth express their cultural identity. The study draws upon the first author’s critical self-reflections, recorded while facilitating and observing children’s engagement in creative exercises.

To mitigate potential bias and enrich interpretation, we employed dialogical collaborative autoethnography by systematically juxtaposing the first author’s lived reflections with the second author’s critical, external analysis.

Author Roles

The first author, as the primary autoethnographer, generated data by articulating his lived experiences at the camp. Reflecting on his engagement with the children, he offered an “insider” perspective, providing a narrative account of how the events unfolded and sharing resultant emotions and reflections.

A descriptive narrative account was intentionally maintained to preserve the originality of the nuanced details and voices, which are essential for in-depth interpretation and reflection. The first researcher, however, made an initial interpretation based on the narrative account that is juxtaposed with the interpretation of the second researcher.

The second researcher was tasked with providing an “outsider” perspective on the interpretation and assessment of the narrative account provided by the first researcher. Initially, the second researcher engaged in dialogue with the first researcher to deepen exploration by asking probing questions about assumptions, voices and sources of emotion, based on the “auto” data provided by the first researcher. Specific focus was placed on the assumptions and stereotypes within the first researcher’s narrative account.

Next, while exploring the connections between the first researcher’s narrative account and broader social or cultural norms that he may have unconsciously overlooked, the second researcher drew inferences to provide a second interpretation, potentially as an alternative.

The interpretations of the first and second researchers were juxtaposed to collaboratively draw inferences through constructive dialogue and meaning-making processes. Emerging themes, contradictions and areas for

deeper exploration were discussed. The analysis results were finalised and co-drafted by both researchers.

Initial Discordant Social Dynamics

I (first author) was required to facilitate sessions for two student groups. One group consisted of children aged 8-10, and the other, aged 11-15. As I planned to meet and facilitate the sessions, I approached them with expectations of an environment similar to that of students in Bhutan in the presence of a teacher.

Carrying an oversized box containing the sessional materials and kits, I entered the classroom. Unlike in Bhutan, the children did not offer to help me with my load. They exhibited a notable lack of engagement by failing to acknowledge my presence; some did not listen to my instructions, and others did not maintain a formal posture. Instead, some children were giggling, heightening the interactional tension.

As I shared the plan to make the activity more productive with them, some of them even imitated me. Only a few remained attentive. Then a child requested a restroom break, which triggered a cascading effect. In addition, some of them even caused frequent and blatant interruptions of my session. It required me to exercise a high level of patience and to rely strategically on child development approaches to navigate the disruption.

Despite my repeated requests and hints to participate meaningfully, some children remained unmotivated. Finally, when I approached one child, they shared blatantly:

“I want to go home. My dad sent me here. I am not interested in such camps...”

The upfront and direct communication style stunned me. I then began having one-on-one conversations with the children, during which they shared some of their worldviews and life perspectives. One child expressed:

“We should be allowed to make our own decisions. We have the right/power to decide about ourselves.”

They were stressing their freedom to do and be what they wanted.

Overall, the classroom was chaotic, and it took me some time to create the classroom atmosphere I wanted. It was something I had never experienced in Bhutan in my decade-long career as a teacher. It was beyond comparison with the most disruptive classes I had ever experienced in Bhutan.

However, slight variations between the two groups were observed. The class with a higher number of children who had prior schooling experience in Bhutan displayed more disruptive behaviour. The second class did not exhibit significant classroom behaviour problems. They were younger and were mostly those who began their formative schooling in Australia. Therefore, the former group's behaviour appeared more turbulent, showing the sign of being in the phase of cultural adaptation.

Consequently, my observations revealed a stark contrast in classroom conduct between children in Bhutan and their counterparts in the Australian diaspora. This experience triggered an immediate reflexive concern about the potential erosion of traditional Bhutanese values and the expression of respect among our children.

Nevertheless, the disruptive behaviour of children in the older group who had recently arrived in Australia posed serious questions. Are migrant children of different age groups affected differently? Or how does the diasporic context shape the selective retention and articulation of cultural identity?

Spontaneous High-energy Engagement

With a chaotic initial experience, I was concerned about my new group activity. I felt that they would not participate actively and would not complete the task. However, the nature of interaction and participation transformed as we entered into the group model-making activity. Children presented the positive side of learning and enthusiasm.

As soon as they were assigned the activity, they jumped into action.

The children began to exercise agency, approaching me only when they ran out of materials and needed my assistance in sourcing natural materials,

such as leaves and twigs. Using a variety of materials, including soaps, water and tissue paper, they created rivers, waterfalls, mountains, and many more.

The activity had them exhibit vibrant creativity, deep engagement, and ownership of their learning. They showcased cognitive flexibility, debated ideas freely, and innovated without hesitation. The room hummed with focused energy, and some even skipped breaks to continue working. By the end of the session, scraps littered the floor, and colours smudged their shirts, yet they held the concrete outcomes of their intensive efforts.

They were also forthcoming and displayed confidence in sharing their opinion and presenting their work. Unlike in Bhutan, they did not push the presentation to others or shy away from presenting. They provoked a deep conversation, and I had to stop them only in the interest of time.

This demonstration of unexpected behaviour during the activity session opened my eyes to a new set of competencies: Critical thinking, collaborative problem-solving, and intellectual autonomy, fostered by the activity-based learning to which they were exposed.

Additionally, when they were given the task of building models, observing the changes in their conduct and worldview, I expected that the children would come up with either a hybrid or features predominantly reflecting an Australian landscape.

However, the resulting models revealed manifestations of cultural retention, reflecting sacred architecture (chortens/stupas), traditional clustered village layouts, prayer flags, and natural landscapes evocative of Bhutan's topography. All the groups prepared models that articulated Bhutan's unique geo-cultural features and topographical landscapes.

When replicating the activity with the second cohort, I reiterated the strict methodological neutrality: No reference to the previous group's work or any cultural cues. Despite this, the second group's models similarly served as compelling affirmations of affiliation with Bhutanese identity. They emphasised environmental ideals (green, clean, peaceful) and communal harmony, often explicitly linking their creations to Bhutan in verbal reflections. Children described their models using phrases:

“It’s like a village back home, near the mountains, with a chorten for peace.”

“We made it green everywhere, like Bhutan, with prayer flags for good luck.”

“This is a temple and community hall together, how we do it... sharing.”

In addition, the children even presented the intangible values and underlying principles of the Bhutanese community. They highlighted the essence of Gross National Happiness, the development philosophy of Bhutan, in the rationale for their design.

“We put rivers and forests because nature is important for a good life, like GNH [Gross National Happiness].”

Some of the presentations even portrayed that children remained updated with new developments in Bhutan. They displayed their work in line with the aims and objectives of the new initiatives, like the Gelephu Mindfulness City.

“Our community is clean and happy, with space for everyone – like Gelephu Mindfulness City.”

This outcome was methodologically significant. They received absolutely no cultural prompts from the facilitator, as it was merely an attempt to engage children in group work and allow them to express their creativity.

However, their display of artwork was intrinsically representative of Bhutan’s features, despite their daily immersion in Perth’s urban environment and the camp’s location within dominant Western urban settings, such as skyscrapers and shopping malls. This evidence robustly challenges simplistic narratives of cultural erosion.

The models developed by the children revealed some evidence of how Bhutanese migrant children conceptualise community and identity. The activity allowed the children to remain creative and focus on any type of community they deemed “ideal” by consciously avoiding prompts that could lead them to a specific cultural context.

However, the emergence of models that reflected the Bhutanese landscape and cultural ethos suggested a deep cultural rootedness, functioning as tangible declarations of their tradition and identity. Rather than indicating cultural loss due to migration, the models suggested heightened cultural consciousness among the children.

The inclusion of chortens and prayer flags should be understood not just as cultural memory, but as the deployment of “Funds of Identity”, resources historically accumulated and socially distributed that the children use to define themselves in the Australian context (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014; Poole, 2017).

Reflection: The Dynamics of Cultural Negotiation

When observing children’s classroom conduct at Drukyl Camp, my initial instinct was to interpret their behaviour through a deficit lens, a reflex rooted in contrasting Bhutanese and Australian pedagogical values. What Bhutanese children in Perth did was in contradiction to my long standing experience in Bhutanese classrooms, where children often sought constant teacher approval, constrained by fear of judgement.

It, therefore, contradicted the prevailing narrative that migration inherently leads to cultural and identity erosion. While it is well documented that migration presents challenges, the camp activity revealed how it also simultaneously fosters cultural resilience and conscious identity construction in young people, mitigating the looming fear of cultural loss.

The initial behavioural discordance reflects “behavioural code-switching”, a strategy used by migrant youth to navigate the conflicting expectations of the home culture’s hierarchy and the host culture’s egalitarianism (Molinsky, 2007).

The children were enacting an Australian “student habitus” (Bourdieu, 2017) which prioritises autonomy. Acknowledging the validity of associated stressors, contemporary findings reveal a more dynamic process wherein children demonstrate remarkable adaptive capacities that transform cross-cultural navigation into an exercise in resilience and syncretic identity formation (Baumert et al., 2024). This was evident among children at Drukyl Camp who demonstrated active engagement in cultural syncretism.

This duality underscores the cognitive paradox of migration. While cultural transition can provoke anxiety about identity loss, it simultaneously equips young migrants with unique cognitive advantages.

At Drukyl, the children's initial "chaos" may not reflect disrespect, but rather the exhausting and exhilarating work of synthesising Bhutanese hierarchy with Australian egalitarianism. In other words, a reflection of transitional stress and identity negotiation among youths straddling two worlds.

Their later brilliance in collaborative creation suggests not erosion, but the forging of a hybrid identity, one blending tradition with globally relevant skills, from silent deference to the courage of creative expression, and from external enforcement to internalised ownership.

Migration, while destabilising, may ultimately cultivate Bhutanese individuals equipped to thrive on a global stage, honouring their heritage while mastering universal competencies. What elders mourn as loss might be the difficult, dazzling birth of a new way to be Bhutanese.

Thus, the question shifts. Is preserving a "pure" Bhutanese identity in isolation truly preferable to nurturing globally engaged citizens?

We distinguish between genuine erosion of respect and the transitional turbulence that children experience when negotiating dual cultural frameworks. Nevertheless, we remain alert to how our academic leanings might predispose us to overemphasise adaptive resilience. This dual perspective generates both tension and insight.

Moreover, the first author's visits to schools in Perth also revealed how Australian education cultivates creativity, critical inquiry, and collaborative problem-solving, the same competencies that were witnessed flourishing during the model-making activity at Camp Drukyl.

This knowledge explicitly challenged reductive claims that migration inherently damages socio-emotional growth. While acknowledging Western approaches to fostering student agency, we remain emotionally anchored in traditions that emphasise obedience, respect and compliance.

This raises another important question: Are we misreading generational evolution through a traditional lens?

My experience at the Drukyul camp revealed a complex tension around the concept of respect, with the findings contradicting the ways in which it is demonstrated. Based on my experiences in Bhutanese classrooms, respect means sitting silently, speaking only when invited, and using deferential, non-assertive tones. Respect means to exercise restraint and self-censorship, both in terms of tone and words you use, especially if you are talking to an elder.

Schools in Bhutan rigorously reinforce this decorum, supported by familial and societal expectations. This background ingrained in me specific expectations of decorum (discipline/etiquette), characterised by student deference, restrained self-expression, and teacher authority.

Therefore, my analysis consciously interrogates simplistic narratives of cultural erosion while acknowledging the emotional validity of intergenerational fears. I realised I was oblivious to the value differences between the two culturally distinct education systems. Simultaneously, my worldview differed from that of younger Bhutanese in Australia who navigate hybrid identities with innate fluidity.

Having acknowledged the intergenerational differences and exposure of children in a multicultural environment, adults will need to question their own mindset if they are to allow children to grow into global citizens.

While Bhutan is a highly collectivist society, and the elderly generation would like to maintain this, including filial piety among their children, their new environment in Australia continues to help them focus on their rights and freedoms and to embrace individualistic values.

Parents will need to find ways to strike a balance, to allow children to navigate their transnational identity smoothly by allowing them to learn the values of an individualistic society, and at the same time, encouraging them to take part in activities such as community services, voluntarism and family discussion to value families and collectivism.

Conclusion

This study challenges the prevailing narrative of “cultural erosion” that permeates the discourse of the Bhutanese diaspora in Australia. Through the reflexive lens of collaborative autoethnography and the empirical evidence of the “Ideal Community Model-Making” activity, we find that Bhutanese-Australian children are not discarding their heritage but are actively negotiating a sophisticated, syncretic identity.

While their initial behavioural comportment, characterised by assertiveness and autonomy, may appear to elders as a deviation from traditional *driglam namzha*, our analysis frames this as a necessary adaptation.

The “chaos” observed was not a rejection of values, but the friction of navigating two distinct social fields. Voluntarily incorporating Bhutanese symbols of spiritual and social identity into their creations demonstrated that they remain deeply rooted in Bhutanese cosmology.

These findings have profound implications for diasporic parenting and community policy. Rather than enforcing a binary choice between “traditional obedience” and “Western corruption”, the community must recognise the validity of the hybrid identities their children are constructing.

Initiatives like the Drukyl Camp should move beyond the didactic instruction of etiquette and embrace arts-based, agentic pedagogies that allow children to co-construct their identities. Bhutanese children in Perth are not “lost”; they are forging a new way of being Bhutanese, one that is resilient, globally competent, and deeply, if differently, connected to their roots.

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