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# Gross National Happiness, British Values, and Non-Cognitive Skills: The Role and Perspective of Teachers in Bhutan and England

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# **Gross National Happiness, British Values, and Non-Cognitive Skills: The Role and Perspective of Teachers in Bhutan and England**

One of the fundamental debates in education is on what schools should teach, and in the balance between academic content and the role of the school to teach non-cognitive skills and traits. This article explores how teachers think about, and experience, their roles and responsibilities beyond merely deliverers of curricular academic content. We conducted focus groups and classroom observations of teachers in England and teachers in Bhutan. In each case, we discuss the policy and curricular context surrounding the role of schools to society, and in how this translates to the teachers themselves. In this comparison we found some convergence in the expression of stress to deliver an ‘over-subscribed’ curriculum and in the shared nationalistic goals of some sort of values education being offered, but we also found divergence in how teachers thought about their role and relationship to students, school culture, and if educational trends related to non-cognitive skills should be measured and assessed.

Keywords: Non-cognitive skills; Gross National Happiness; Teacher Perspectives; Bhutan; England

## **Introduction**

What should schools teach, and what is education for? These are basic and fundamental questions in education, but ones with complex – and perhaps unknowable – answers. Whilst we are no-doubt in an educational era of accountability, measurement, achievement outcomes, and ‘learnification’ (Biesta 2010), there is a growing movement towards the promotion of schools not only teaching academic content and skills, but also teaching ‘other skills’ that promote student academic/economic success. These ‘other skills’ are frequently becoming termed as non-cognitive skills, but could also be called soft skills, social emotional learning, or any number of personal positive characteristics of students now being promoted, such as: perseverance, resilience, empathy, self-control, agency, creativity, inclusivity, and happiness. There is also a

renewed effort for schools to promote ‘national’ values, morals, and character as, in many cases, vehicles of national politics that are increasingly being defined by globalization and globalism (or its populist rejection). However, schools designed to promote nationalism and national identity is certainly not a new phenomenon and, indeed, is foundational to the initiation of the modern mass education movement (Ramirez and Boli 1987). Our research explores the role of schools and the perspectives of teachers in shaping both shared societal goals and individual cognitive and affective self-actualization. In this article, we specifically explore the beliefs and opinions of teachers, and tensions in education systems, to the phenomenon of non-cognitive skills with a small comparative case between England and Bhutan.

The obvious first question is why attempt to compare England and Bhutan? To answer this, we first argue that a more expansive definition of ‘compare’ is required: one that recognises the breakdown of country-cases as bounded and focuses on supranational layers of educational discourse and meaning that flow through various ‘scapes’ (Carney 2009) and produce structures and policies shaped by social actors (Bartlett and Vavrus 2017). The purpose of ‘comparison’ in this study was not one of judgemental similarities and differences, but rather the purpose was one of exploring convergence and divergence in cross-case analysis (Lee and Manzon, 2014). Bhutan and England – whilst being wildly different contexts in many respects – have some surprising similarities that are worth exploring in our interconnected age. Both countries have experienced the kind of ‘national culture’ delineation within its politics which has seeped into its educational policies. What it means to be ‘English’ or ‘Bhutanese’ is being put on schools to figure out and *teach*. At the same time, schools are also being tasked to teach academic content – and cosmopolitan ‘21<sup>st</sup> century skills’ to access that content – and to be a positive contributor to the national and global ‘21<sup>st</sup> century economy’. These confounding pressures on schools and

teachers send a lot of mixed-messages and leave many teachers and school leaders scratching their heads with the answer to the question of ‘what they should teach’, let alone trying to find the time and resources to fit it all in. Many just leave the profession altogether in frustration, which is a problem both in England and in Bhutan (DfE 2017; MoE 2016).

With these tensions in mind, we set out in this research project to understand the experiences and opinions of teachers in both Bhutan and England in relation to non-cognitive skills. The second obvious question is what do we mean by non-cognitive skills? That will be answered more in-depth in the next section. For the sake of introduction, our research aim was to understand how teachers viewed their role in promoting (or not) non-cognitive skills and values, and whether or not these kinds of values and skills should be made explicit in curriculum and assessment according to teachers. This project was not to advance or promote but, rather, to understand the teacher experience. Our research questions were the following: (1) What has been the experience of teachers with non-cognitive skills in classrooms in England and Bhutan? (2) Are there any curricula or current measurements of non-cognitive skill learning outcomes in either Bhutan or England? (3) If non-cognitive skills were measured, assessed, and operationalized further in the curriculum and learning outcomes; would it be useful and supported by teachers and how would they suggest it be done?

In order to answer our research questions, we conducted five focus groups of teachers in five schools in each country. Each focus group comprised of three to seven teachers per school and lasted around one hour in length. Schools were chosen for access and convenience, with schools in England drawn from the Midlands area and schools in Bhutan being selected from the three Western districts of Haa (1), Paro (2), and Thimphu (2). The schools in the English Midlands could all be classified as urban or semi-urban, whilst the schools in Western Bhutan

were a mix of urban, semi-urban, and rural. In addition to focus groups, we also conducted classroom observations in each school. Data from the focus groups and our observations were analysed using thematic analysis (Miles and Huberman 1994) that featured both *a priori* codes based on our research questions, and codes emerging from the data. Triangulation was achieved through the use of three simultaneous and independent data collectors. All appropriate ethical procedures and expectations were followed, with agreement given by all participants and school leadership teams, as well as ethics approval granted by our institutions. The sample size is obviously not meant to be representational or generalizable, but enough to initiate potential areas of further research and attention.

In this article, we will first move to a discussion on non-cognitive skills, with a more detailed definition and exploration of its global discourse and current trends. We will then discuss various non-cognitive skills and the teaching of ‘values’ discourses within England and Bhutan, respectively, which will largely address our second research question. Following this discussion, we will then move to our findings from our data in England and Bhutan, which will address our first and third research questions. Lastly, we will consider what the comparative convergences and divergences between these two cases have to tell us about global educational trends.

### **Non-Cognitive Skills, Educational Goals, and the Role of the Teacher**

The term ‘non-cognitive skills’ is, arguably, an imprecise term – if not a controversial one. It is a term that comes primarily from economics, but from two very different sources. The first source comes from the classic economic-sociological-Marxist work, *Schooling in Capitalist America* (Bowles and Gintis [1976] 2011). Bowles and Gintis argued that education’s purpose was to reproduce social and economic structures, and schools particularly rewarded certain types of

personality or noncognitive traits – family backgrounds, personality characteristics and self-presentation, credentials – which were in turn rewarded in the capitalist economy. Farkas (2003) notes that Bowles and Gintis use ‘noncognitive traits’ and ‘personality traits’ interchangeably and is meant as catch-all terms, and also highlights the context in which Bowles and Gintis were writing in the 1970s: their argument was a direct response to the notion that cognitive intelligence was inheritable and it was this differentiation that led to stratified educational outcomes.

The second source of the non-cognitive skills term comes from the more recent work of Heckman and colleagues (Heckman 2000; Heckman and Kautz 2012; Kautz, et al. 2014; see also: Jones, Crowley and Greenberg 2017). This definition of non-cognitive skills is provided by Kautz et al. (2014) as ‘personality traits, goals, character, motivations, and preferences that are valued in the labor market, in school, and in many other domains’ (2). This line of argumentation is almost entirely one of education for human capital development, and certainly less Marxist than Bowles and Gintis, in which non-cognitive skills promote ‘more able people [to] acquire more skills; more skilled people [to] become more able’ (Heckman 2000, 4). Like Bowles and Gintis ([1976] 2011) before him, Heckman (2000) emphasizes the importance of family and environment in fostering educational (e.g. economic) success and is very critical of standardized achievement tests that measure ‘cognitive skills’ (Heckman and Kautz 2012). Non-cognitive skills is often used interchangeably with ‘soft skills’ (i.e. Heckman and Kautz 2012). Following these precedents, and taking the lead set by Farkas (2003), we will also use ‘non-cognitive skills’ as a broad, catch-all term, to include any character and personality traits, values, and soft skills which appear in education beyond a basic academic-cognitive curriculum.

Whilst much of the current non-cognitive skills arguments are framed in economic social efficiency, social inequality, and human capital development, there are also movements to pay greater attention to personal and moral values and to *teach* these skills at school. Of course, the direct teaching of values, morals, and ‘character’ has been fraught with controversies historically, particularly in diverse and multicultural societies such as Australia (e.g. Jones 2008) and the United States (e.g. Mason 2009; Rieff 2001) and criticized as a form of colonial social control and cultural indoctrination (e.g. Holmes and Crossley 2004; Lomawaima 1995; Willinsky 1998). (See Kristjánsson (2013) for a response to these criticisms.) In an ironic sense, the actual teaching of moral character and personality traits is exactly the kind of social reproduction that Bowles and Gintis ([1976] 2011) critique. Less moralistic, perhaps, but just as values-laden are the current educational trends of ‘grit’ (Duckworth 2016), ‘growth mindset’ (Dweck 2017; Yeager and Dweck 2012); and other emphases on personal characteristics such as self-control, resilience, agency, ‘habits of mind’, and social emotional learning (Costa and Kallick 2009; Durlak et al. 2015; Ripley 2014; Seligman et al. 2009; Tough 2016).

These seemingly straight-forward non-cognitive skills are not without their criticisms as well. When Duckworth (2016) began sharing her work on ‘grit’, it caught on like wildfire and, admitted by Duckworth herself (Kamenetz 2016, 25 May), slipped away from her. Some schools and school districts in the United States began to look towards the operationalization and assessment of ‘grit’, to which Duckworth (2016, 26 March) pushed back. Recent research looking at the evidence of the ‘grit effect’ on educational improvement have found the results to be less than promised (Credé, Tynan and Harms 2016; Rimfeld et al. 2016; West 2014) and has also come to be criticized as ‘blaming the victim for their own failure’ within unequitable and



institutionally racist American schools (Golden, 2017; Herold 2015, 24 January; Perry 2016, 2 May).

More broadly, the idea that education and teachers are more than just fact-memorisation cognitive factories is certainly not new. For example, John Locke ([1692] 2009), the influential seventeenth century English philosopher, promoted ‘the formation of a virtuous character’ as being foundational to education – although he proposed to develop character through deprivation, fear, and severe corporal punishment. Influential in the Indian context, as well to global thought, Rabindranath Tagore advocated for education to embrace attributes such as spiritual self-realisation, moral development, and the co-relationship between the individual and the natural and social world (Mukherjee 2012). Labaree (1997) summarizes the coexisting-yet-contradictory goals of modern education as *democratic equality* (social inclusion and informed citizens), *social efficiency* (economic skills and human capital), and *social mobility* (a meritocratic system that rewards individual achievement). Biesta (2010) defines the parameters of education as being those of *qualification* (knowledge, skills, and understanding that allow children to “do something” as adults), *socialization* (inserting children into existing social practices), and *subjectification* (cultivating and self-actualizing the individual). In line with Labaree’s notion of social efficiency and Biesta’s notion of qualification, at this point in time there is an emerging ‘skills and learning outcome’ agenda (European Commission 2016; UNESCO 2016) that disproportionately favours social efficiency and qualification over other goals and parameters of education. There is an increasingly vociferous argument that the kinds of cognitive skills previously emphasized in achievement tests in the name of educational accountability are not enough in the ‘21<sup>st</sup> century workplace’ (García 2014; Kautz et al. 2012; Robinson and Aronica 2015; Sahlberg 2010).

The role of the teacher sits squarely in the middle of all of these competing interests, goals, and noncognitive trends. Whilst there is certainly not enough space for a full discussion on teachers and teaching here, it is worth remembering John Dewey's 1897 *My Pedagogic Creed*, in which he advocates: 'I believe, finally, that the teacher is engaged, not simply in the training of individuals, but in the formation of the proper social life' (cf. Nebeker 2002, 14). Dewey was writing these words at the same time that a specific structure of schooling and teaching was globally proliferating with the spread of mass education. The traditional role of teachers was predominantly one of both 'intellectual overseer' and 'drillmaster' (Finkelstein 1989) and teacher-centred pedagogy was spread worldwide – most famously through the Bell and Lancastrian methods. Even as classroom organisation was centred on the teacher, it is still understood that the teacher had a responsibility to shape students social, culturally, and morally (Cuban 2009). As education became more progressive and student-centred through the influence of Dewey, Pestalozzi, Froebel, Montessori, and others, this responsibility of teachers remained, although perhaps less explicit and top-down.

In the mid to late-twentieth century, critiques of how schooling inculcated and preferenced certain values over others led to notions of social and cultural reproduction (i.e. Bourdieu and Passeron [1977] 1990) and in teachers perpetuating a 'hidden curriculum'. Whilst researchers such as Bowles and Gintis, Apple (2004), and Giroux and Purpel (1983) critiqued the capitalist or neoliberal values being promulgated through education, they just as readily advocated that schools should teach social justice and emancipatory values. Suffice to say, no matter whose 'values' were deemed right or wrong, there remains an advocacy for teachers to go beyond the cognitive curriculum and to take some part in shaping the lives of children. The question, for us, is in how teachers today view that role in light of all of the academic

achievement, outcomes, and measurability discourse and policy. As can be seen above, there are two tracks within non-cognitive skills and the responsibility and role of the teacher: to teach children some sort of positively-deemed moral/value/social/citizenship traits, but also to teach such non-cognitive skills that allow the child greater access to cognitive learning (and, thus, greater economic and social outcomes).

### *Discourse in England*

In his history and advocacy of ‘character education’ in the UK, Arthur (2003, 9) argues:

Schools are identified as having a crucial role to play in helping shape and reinforce basic character traits. This represents a new and radical government education policy and is a notion of character education that is explicitly linked to both raising pupil school performance and meeting the needs of the emerging new economy or information age.

Arthur goes on to link ‘character education’ with ‘citizenship education’ in the British context. This linkage, and the above quote, is elucidative in a variety of ways. First, that schools can and should have a direct role in the moral formation of children. Second, that this shaping of a child’s ‘character’ is directly related to academic performance and economic success – both individual and collective. And third, that the development of ‘good character’ is directly related to the development of a ‘good British citizen’. These notions about character education are undergoing resurgence in England, but are ideas that have existed in British education for a long time – certainly with much zeal during the Victorian era (Arthur 2003). Today, there are certainly debates and opinions on all sides. For example, the confluence of ‘good character’ and ‘good citizenship’ can be problematic in the sense of viewing citizenship as an individual outcome to be gained and won by being ‘good’ (Biesta 2011).

Regardless of the academic debate, in the current English National Curriculum (DfE 2017), all levels of the school system – in England called “key stages” – feature some aspect of citizenship education; personal, social and emotional development (particularly in early years); sex and relationship education; and spiritual, moral, social and cultural development (SMSC). The SMSC (DfE 2014) domain is particularly important to this discussion, as it requires and evaluates schools on how they deliver religious education, provide “collective worship,” support an understanding of ‘British citizenship’, and promote “fundamental British values.” According to the SMSC, schools should teach students to develop self-esteem and self-confidence, “distinguish right from wrong,” accept responsibility and show initiative, respect public institutions and services, respect different cultures and people, and respect democracy and English law. Whilst there is no explicit use of the term ‘non-cognitive skills’ in English curriculum or policy, nonetheless there is an expectation that it is the responsibility of schools to teach them. It is also important to note that government-funded schools in England are not mandated to be secular and many are affiliated either with the Anglican Church of England or with the Catholic Church in England and Wales. Whilst ‘British Values’ and SMSC promotes multi-faith and multicultural education, the educational system itself is built upon Christian moral foundations.

SMSC requirements aside, many English schools are focusing on developing character education curriculum themselves, with the help of organizations like the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues. In the Jubilee Centre’s framework (2017), character is broken down into four ‘virtues’: civic, moral, intellectual, and performance. Through this framework all of the non-cognitive skills previously mentioned can be accounted for, such as: autonomy, critical thinking, curiosity (intellectual virtues); compassion, gratitude, respect (moral virtues); citizenship,

service, community (civic virtues); and resilience, determination, and perseverance (performance virtues) (Jubilee Centre 2017, 5). Again, the important point here is that these virtues can be explicitly *taught*, embedded in the curriculum, and teacher education can be used to support teachers in developing their pupils' character. The Jubilee Centre (2013) argues that there is an overwhelming call from English parents for schools to be directly involved in teaching their children morals, values, and character; as well as the same sentiment from teachers (Arthur et al. 2015).

Some British researchers have begun to incorporate the term 'non-cognitive skills', such as Joshi (2014) in her review of the British cohort studies (see also Flèche 2017; Gutman and Schoon 2013). Terms such as 'character education', 'values education', and 'religious education' have been used in English education for quite a long time, but has seen resurgence as of late in no small part in relation and reaction to other global trends. Additionally, there is an increasing call in England for more educational focus on '21<sup>st</sup> century skills' (see Suto 2013). In particular, this advocacy is coming from industry and being supported as a means to economic development in the '21<sup>st</sup> century economy' (Confederation of British Industry 2016).

### ***Discourse in Bhutan***

In Bhutan, though 'non-cognitive skills' is not a well-known phrase, its ideas have existed as 'values education', 'wholesome education', and in more recent times as 'Gross National Happiness (GNH) Education' (Kezang Sherab 2013; Karma Ura 2009). Research and policy point to the fact of their educational importance (e.g. Kezang Sherab 2013; MoE 2014; MoE 2010; RGoB 2005). Bhutan's Fourth *Druk Gyalpo* [king], Jigme Singye Wangchuk, had repeatedly mentioned that the nation's effort must be geared towards promoting *Sem Go Choep Zo Ni* ['enabling children to use their minds and hearts to positive ends, for themselves, their

families, and the country’ (Pema Thinley 2007)]. Adding to the importance of placing others before self, Karma Ura (2009, 5) notes that:

A person’s welfare is not achievable by him or her alone, but by pursuing communal welfare and social goals. The foundation for a truly, happy society can easily be eroded if the welfare of the community that underpins our profound interdependencies, disappears due to the wrong direction of value education and other negative influences.

These findings are indicative of the fact that, the presence and importance of non-cognitive ‘values’ was prevalent long before the formalization of education as a social institution.

The philosophical vision of Gross National Happiness (GNH), which was first pronounced by His Majesty the Fourth King Jigme Singye Wangchuk in the 1970s, is placed as Bhutan’s development priority (DoE 2003). This philosophy directly opposed the notion of ‘Gross Domestic Product’ commonly used in many countries as an indicator of progress.

Towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and the beginning of 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the Bhutan government has provided much emphasis to engage scholars from both within and abroad in intellectual dialogue to operationalise the concept of GNH (Kezang Sherab 2013). GNH is now based on four pillars (sustainable and equitable socio economic development; preservation and promotion of cultural heritage; preservation and sustainable use of the environment and good governance), nine domains (psychological wellbeing, health, education, culture, time use, good governance, community vitality, ecological diversity and resilience, and living standards) and thirty-three indicators used to measure the progress of the nation (Karma Ura et al. 2012). According to the GNH philosophy, all developmental policies and programmes (social, economic, political, and religious) in Bhutan should be designed to maximise citizen’s happiness through building resilience, ensuring equity, and sustainability (Kezang Sherab 2013).

According to influential Bhutanese researcher Karma Ura (2009), educational systems and parental modeling play an important role in understanding values and encouraging the development of wholesome and positive emotions, a concept that could be better embraced through education since children spend much of their time in the schools. Like Karma Ura's concept of parental modelling, teacher modelling (Kezang Sherab 2013) is also an important concept which we will highlight later in this article.

There does not appear to be much room in the current Bhutanese curriculum and political environment, however, for schools to take time and resources to explicitly promote non-cognitive skills. With Bhutanese teachers complaining about the vast syllabus/curriculum and of not having good interactive time with students, most teaching periods allotted are purely dedicated to conducting cognitive skill-based lessons (REC 2009; Kezang Sherab and Phuntsho Dorji 2013). Even if teachers want to include explicit non-cognitive skills instruction into their already tight schedule, like the Ministry of Education's life-skills education programme, it is done so based on their own creative machinations to find time to fit these subjects into their teaching schedule (MoE 2016b). These difficulties subtly imply that the Bhutanese curriculum prioritises academic achievement over other non-cognitive skills and that it indicates a curriculum driven by economic social efficiency, at the cost of what may seem as lesser lucrative skills. The Bhutanese educational system sends a message that what is outside the prescribed curriculum is not valued because it does not translate to academic grades (Kezang Sherab 2013). The education system in Bhutan continues to wrestle with the place of schools in promoting socio-cultural values and 'non-cognitive skills', whilst at the same time increasing standards and accountability to build a '21<sup>st</sup> century' knowledge economy. This may, indeed, be a false

dichotomy but, as we will report below, it is certainly not conceptualized as synonymous by the experiences of the majority of Bhutanese teachers we interviewed.

## **Findings**

### ***Findings from England***

The term ‘non-cognitive skills’ was not immediately recognizable to the English teachers in our focus groups. However, after some discussion they came up with many synonymous examples of the nomenclature and school practices that promote ‘non-cognitive skills’. One school was familiar with the idea of ‘grit’ (Duckworth 2016), even applying the term to themselves as well as the children. Another school used the framework of the ‘Characteristics of Effective Learning’ – which is taken from the early years English curriculum, but that they have applied to all levels. Another school called them ‘life skills’, whilst another school actively used the ‘growth-mindset’ philosophy (Dweck 2017) and featured it in staff trainings. The phrase ‘21<sup>st</sup> century skills’ was also used by many schools.

Teacher modelling and school culture were the most significant themes we found in our focus groups and observations. The teachers from all the English schools in our study were quite adamant about the importance of the role of the teacher in modelling good behavior, virtues, and personal skills. In the classrooms, we observed teachers modelling politeness through raising their own hands when asking a question of the class to demonstrate the desired behavior, and in the polite language that they used to speak to students. We also observed teachers focus on the process of learning just as much as the ‘right or wrong’ answers – e.g. a teacher to a small group of students working on a task: ‘*What was the thought process here.*’ The English teachers themselves described the importance of their role in relation to non-cognitive skills [our term]. All focus groups described the importance of an inclusive and positive school culture, starting with the precedent set by school leadership. On the schools’ role in promoting the happiness of



children, one teacher stated: *'I don't think you can teach happiness, but you can create happiness. So, through your teaching ... The environment that you set in your classroom can create happiness.'*

One emerging theme from our data was the notion that schools not only educate students about non-cognitive skills, but four out of five focus groups explicitly, and unprompted, mentioned their responsibility to educate *parents and the community* as well. Many of the schools offered parent workshops on promoting positive social behaviors, healthy living, and positive academic characteristics, although there is no educational policy that requires this in England. When this came up in the focus groups, we naturally segued in a discussion on whether or not there were values conflicts between schools and parents. One teacher stated, *'It's not necessarily about which 'values should we teach', but rather watching children in a diverse school realise that they have their own values.'* A teacher at a different school stated with some exasperation *'There is not that expectation of resilience at home as we do have here. Particularly their manners: holding open the doors, using cutlery, simple things that you would predict that children know how to do coming into school that they don't have these days.'* Many of the English schools in which we collected data were Catholic, and unreservedly promoted Catholic values as being universal values.

In the schools we visited, reminders of religious faith are everywhere. Posters in the classrooms instruct students *'How Do We Pray'* and religious imagery like the crucifix can be found in classrooms and corridors. However, mixed into the overtly religious displays are posters that feature the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, posters with proclamations like, *'We Are an Eco-School!'*, as well as posters promoting British Values. There is certainly a wide variety of messages being mixed together in all of the schools we observed, and an equivocation of values.

According to one teacher, *‘There is a triangulation between virtues, gospels, and also the British Values as well that underpin everything.’*

When asked whether non-cognitive skills should be given its own explicit curriculum and place within the school day, none of the schools in our study had this already and none of the teachers believed that this was a good idea. Overwhelmingly, the teachers believed that non-cognitive skills should simply be present throughout the lessons and could only really be *taught* through teacher modelling and school culture. Many argued that the promotion of non-cognitive skills does explicitly occur in extracurricular activities and student-run organizations. All of the schools have some form of religious education, and one school mentioned the specific time in the school day to pray. One teacher stated, *‘Ideally, it [non-cognitive skills] should underpin everything ... You can’t just teach in a bubble or a vacuum, it’s got to be applied elsewhere.’* A teacher at a different school argued, *‘We can’t just stand and lecture about this kind of stuff [non-cognitive skills]. No one wants that, and you wouldn’t tolerate it as an adult either. You have to be creative about it.’*

As the participants in this study rejected the notion that non-cognitive skills should be made explicit in curriculum and schedule, they also firmly rejected the notion that non-cognitive skills should be measured and assessed. The teachers in our focus groups emphasized the importance of the informal and improvisational role that is required to teach non-cognitive skills. One teacher argued that the role of the teacher is to *‘know the students’*, to which the rest of the focus group agreed. According to another teacher, *‘You do know as a teacher who is the resilient one, who is the one that perseveres, the one who doesn’t like to take risks. I am aware of the children that respond to a challenge and am responsible for that as a teacher. It’s informal assessment.’* According to a different teacher from a different school:

*It's very important to teach these things [non-cognitive skills]. We have to. Lots of kids come to school rude and we need to teach them good manners ... Of course we assess it. We assess it informally. It's not a written test, but we write in their report cards that they're really kind to other children in the class. We teach manners, we do.*

All teachers mentioned the comments they make on student report cards that address their own assessment on a child's non-cognitive skills [our term]. Schools did use non-cognitive skills as a motivator, in terms of weekly motivation certificates or, in one school, weekly 'virtue certificates'. One teacher argued

*What would be the purpose of grading a child [on non-cognitive skills]? I can't see one. What we're trying to teach – to, say, a child with behavioral difficulties – is strategies to help them cope. To help them be in the classroom. Who defines it? ... How would you ever be able to measure that grit-level, because it is for each individual and at different times.*

The mention of the emotional fluctuations in a child's life was mentioned by many teachers across focus groups. The teachers were acutely aware of their students' moods and paid attention to what was happening both 'at home' and 'on the playground' for each student.

Importantly, in terms educational policy, teachers reported much concern and consternation towards the national curriculum in regards to their role. All of the focus groups in our study expressed concern over the burden that an 'oversubscribed' curriculum was placing on their perceived role as mentor and counsellor. Many felt that they were unable to take the time to really attend to a student's happiness – or unhappiness, as the case may be – but would like to be able to have the flexibility to do so. Expressed one teacher, '*There is absolutely no empathy in government targets for [fluctuations in student performance based on outside home or environmental factors]. It is very black-and-white.*' Other teachers mentioned that non-cognitive skills promotion was much easier in the early years, because it was a major component of the

curriculum, but became much more difficult as the students progressed into higher levels. One teacher stated, *‘Non-cognitive skills is very present in early years and primary years, but really drops in secondary school, although it is just as important.’*

### ***Findings from Bhutan***

Findings from the focus group discussions in Bhutan generally indicated that the teacher participants showed little or no awareness of the term ‘non-cognitive skills’. They provided multiple interpretations. For instance, a teachers from one school mentioned that *‘non-cognitive skills’* refer to activities that are *‘more physical and less mental exercise,’ ‘may be something to do with learning by doing,’ ‘does not need much of thinking’* and *‘without using head’*. One of the teachers from another school believed that non-cognitive skills was all about the practical aspects of learning such as the learning of skills through games and sports as opposed to theoretical learning, which was considered to be more cognitively-oriented in nature. Curiously, the phrase ‘21<sup>st</sup> century skills’ was used quite frequently between the schools we visited. Another teacher from this focus group perceived that *Driglam Namzha* [Bhutanese cultural etiquette and values] and extra-curricular activities were avenues where students are provided opportunities to learn various non-cognitive skills. Discussing the reasons why schools initiate extra-curricular programmes, a teacher in a focus-group mentioned that:

*Not all students are alike. Some are quite talented in outdoor activities and to make their living it is not necessary that they are good at cognitive skills. They can also make their living out of their talents and skills. Some of our children have hidden talents which they are not able to showcase through cognitive skills. Therefore, these [non-cognitive] skills are also equally important to cognitive skills.*

In terms of what schools offer as extra-curricular activities and programmes, one school organises extra-curricular literary activities such as extempore speeches, debates, elocution, and quizzes to help students build their confidence, develop speaking, and to promote leadership skills. Another school had instituted programmes such as ‘sharing time’ and ‘house parent’. The sharing time was dedicated to teaching children ‘GNH values’ like respect, right speech, and right action. The house parenting programme encouraged every teacher in the school to adopt about 20 to 30 students to be put directly under their care. A particular teacher acted as a parent to these children and had to look after their welfare – both academic and non-academic. Similar to the ‘house parent’ programme, another school followed the ‘adoption’ policy where each teacher had to adopt a student who was considered weak in their studies. One rural boarding school we visited had started an interesting programme called ‘the vegetable goes to school’. Students had to do vegetable gardening in groups and the produce went to the school kitchen. The groups with the maximum produce were rewarded. The teachers from this school claimed that such programmes promoted leadership, team work, and cooperation amongst students besides learning basic agricultural skills. Teachers from all participating schools showed great passion in sharing their extra-curricular programmes, whilst not much has been mentioned about the promotion of ‘non-cognitive skills’ in the classroom or within the academic curriculum.

It was only after some prompting that teachers mentioned – with some reluctance – about what they do in the class to promote non-cognitive skills and values. However, teachers did mention that they have a separate column in their daily lesson plan where they have to mention the relevant values from the text for emphasis. One of the Mathematics teachers shared her experiences of incorporating values and skills into the content teaching in the following words:

*Actually, we do not say that this is the skill you are going to learn today but then somehow, we teach the skills through the lesson that we teach. For example, coping with the stress. We do not say that we are going to teach that but then we somehow incorporate in the lesson indirectly or directly, we teach them through the lessons or the activities that they do in the class.*

For an English-language teacher at one of the middle secondary schools we visited, the teaching of values is infused within a thematic topic from the text. For instance, the first theme was *'looking at ourselves and talking about ourselves'*. According to this teacher, such themes provide opportunity for the students to identify some positive, as well as some negative, aspects about themselves and gives them an opportunity to understand and express their own strengths and weaknesses. For another teacher from the same school who taught Physics, it was difficult for him to teach, as well as to measure, whether the students have been able to learn values and skills. According to this teacher, *'students do something in our presence and different things other times. So, it is quite difficult to pass the judgement whether students have really learnt the skills'*. However, this teacher then went on to speak about the importance of role modelling:

*I think as a teacher we can always model it out, say in the classroom when there is destructive behaviour, instead of shouting at them, we can talk in another way. So that children might model our behaviour pattern ... Say, for instance, punctuality, that is also non-cognitive skills, we cannot just say we have to be always punctual, but we have to model it out, so that children will copy us.*

This was the only teacher who mentioned the importance of positive role modelling in all of our focus-group discussions in Bhutan.

Given the bulkiness of the Bhutanese curriculum, which was also evident in this study, teachers at one of the schools thought that it would be good to have separate values classes to nurture students to become good human beings. These teachers also perceived that it is important

to strike a balance between values development and content knowledge. Teachers from one of the schools remarked that if the curriculum size is reduced they could provide adequate time for the promotion of happiness. Signs promoting GNH values were visible at many schools, alongside portraits of the Fourth and Fifth *Druk Gyalpo* [Kings].

The majority of Bhutanese teachers from our focus-groups advocated that non-cognitive skills or ‘GNH values’ be assessed and recorded – some even advocated to the extent of written examinations. However, many teachers qualified their assertions on assessment in that it should not be in the form of awarding marks or grades, but rather through descriptive feedback in the academic certificates at the end of the year. Such practices can be subjective, but if teachers keep a good record of each student’s conduct and how they progress over the year, it can be helpful. A teacher from one of the schools opined, *‘We do assess them but not in terms of tabulation. We don’t give them marks but we assess them through their behaviours and we correct them [instantly]. Whoever sees a child misbehaving or something goes wrong with the child then the teacher asks and try to find out the problem.’* One of the schools we visited had started a programme called ‘ethics banking’ to help teachers promote GNH values, as well as assess students. In this programme, if a student is found doing something good such as helping another student or volunteering to do something or picking up trash, he or she is given a fake currency note which is accumulated over a period of one year. Students with the maximum collection are rewarded with a prize at the end of the year. At another school we visited, similar in concept to the ‘ethics banking’, we found a programme called ‘emotional bank account’. Students are rewarded and punished, but in terms of a token ‘red dot’ for an undesirable answer or behaviour against their names, or a ‘blue dot’ for a desirable answer or behaviour. A teacher at this school said that they, *‘personally felt it is really important, really helpful and they are really fear of*

*getting this red dots, and at the same time they also demanding us... once they volunteer, they are expecting us to give dots against their name.'* The behavioristic principles of rewards, punishment, and conditioning still remain popular in most schools we visited. In our classroom observations, the primary pedagogy we witnessed was call-and-response and an emphasis on getting the 'right' answer – and to not take a chance with a different one. One teacher spent most of the lesson time making sure that every student had copied information from the chalkboard correctly.

The idea of inclusivity as a societal value is a fairly new concept in the Bhutanese education system. To many teachers, inclusiveness was associated with low academic achievers and children with disabilities. In order to address the issue of low achievers, schools in Bhutan have the practice of ability grouping for classroom seating purposes. However, one of the schools we visited had implemented the practice of peer tutoring and mixed-ability grouping. Teachers in this school maintain that if their students were not able to understand their teaching, they often allowed a student to teach and support the other struggling student. These teachers claimed that peer tutoring often proved to be more powerful than the teachers' own teaching.

On happiness as a value, or as a skill, the Bhutanese teachers we interviewed exhibited mixed feelings about whether they could actually teach it. Whilst some teachers thought that happiness skills could be taught, there were others who thought that it would be difficult and challenging. One teacher maintained that;

*Whatever we are doing right now it's all aimed at how to make them happy but again on the other side it also depends on the child. If the child is deprived of some basic things, it is difficult for the teachers to make him or her happy. All the activities that we have mentioned earlier such as the sharing time, house parent, ethics bank is part of inclusive policy. We don't want to leave any child behind. ...We are trying best but not able to do things as expected.*



Another teacher shared that in order for their students to be happy they advise them not to compare themselves with others and that making comparisons is the source of unhappiness. Some teachers were of the opinion that it is already difficult enough to meet all the academic requirements of their students within the curriculum and, as a result, teaching ‘happiness skills’ would be difficult and challenging.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

The first proposition that we take-away from our research is that teachers are products of the socio-cultural structures and expectations in which they are embedded. Teachers in both England and Bhutan feel pressure within the curriculum, as the weight of carrying the futures of their countries on their backs is keenly felt. Whilst all teachers in both countries expressed their profession as one of counselor and mentor in addition to tutor, there was a divergence in how teachers viewed their role. For the majority of English teachers we interviewed, there was an embrace of their role in shaping the emotional and ‘non-cognitive’ lives of ‘their’ children. Not only that, but most English schools were very explicit in working with parents and the community in order to promote shared academic, non-cognitive, character, and British values. Most importantly, the English teachers we interviewed and observed overwhelmingly saw their position as being a role model, to create a positive school culture, and to foster positive relationships. This finding is in line with the meta-analysis of Hattie (2009) in which he finds that, globally, the most important and effective factor by teachers in student achievement is cultivating positive teacher-student relationships.

In comparison, most of the Bhutanese teachers we interviewed did not immediately express this same sentiment on school culture and role modelling. This was not entirely surprising to us, given that earlier research in the Bhutanese schooling context indicated the

existence of negative role modelling – despite the introduction of GNH values and principles for education – in the form of impolite and rude use of language by the teachers in the classroom (Kezang Sherab 2013). Concepts such as ‘student well-being’ are very new to the Bhutanese education system (Sangay Jamtsho 2015) and a view of behaviourism and punishment as appropriate educational measures – even in the form of physical abuse – is still widespread despite being officially banned (Schuelka 2018). By saying this, we are not explicitly judging, or blaming, Bhutanese teachers, nor are we putting English teachers on a pedestal. Rather, again, we argue that teaching practices are products of the socio-cultural systems and expectations surrounding teachers, as well as the prevailing messages in societies that indicate the role and relationship of the school to society itself. Given its origins from Indian colonial education and Jesuit education – and, it should be mentioned, an already 1,000-year-old Buddhist monastic education system – the modern Bhutanese system continues to view schooling as a place of discipline, rigour, elitism, competition, and exclusion. However, the script of the school’s role in Bhutanese society has been rapidly changing with the emergence of multiple and sometimes contradictory discourses of education such as human capital development, nation-state promotion, inclusion, globalization, and happiness. Bhutanese teachers perhaps did not possess the terminology to express ‘non-cognitive and personality traits as *skills* per se, but certainly understood their role in carrying Bhutanese culture and Buddhist values forward.

The second proposition that we take-away from our research is that there are cultural biases implicit in the conceptualization of current non-cognitive skills discourse – particularly around the notions of critical thinking and argumentative questioning. Would current ‘non-cognitive skills’ trends be able to encompass other cultural attributes such as ‘deferring to authority’ or ‘listening to elders’, as the case could be made for these as skills in Bhutanese

society? It is notable that the discourse on non-cognitive skills in countries such as the United States and England are individualistic in nature. They are almost entirely focused on individual student characteristics and traits that promote individual success (socially and economically). As Biesta (2011) suggests, the notion of creating ‘good’ citizens is wrapped around individualistic neoliberalism. In contrast, the philosophy of GNH in Bhutan is not one of individual happiness, but of the true translation of GNH in Dzongkha as *Gyalyong Gakid Pelzom*, translated roughly as ‘happiness and peace for all nations for the realization of all things good and virtuous’ (Schuelka 2017). Whilst there is certainly room in Bhutanese schools to emphasize social and relational values, particularly in the face of a highly competitive and achievement-orientated Bhutanese system, we question whether ‘grit’ or other non-cognitive skills have a place within what should be a more social and relational way of learning. In this sense, we take our cue from the persuasive arguments of Gergen (2009), in which he argues the aim of education is ‘not that of producing independent, autonomous thinkers ... but of facilitating relational processes that can ultimately contribute to the continuing and expanding flow of relationships within the world more broadly (243).’ Gergen (2009) goes on to advocate for a ‘dialogic classroom’ in which teachers and students are relationally dependent on co-constructing learning. This idea of relational learning might not support an individualist achievement orientation built into many noncognitive skills, but it can certainly fit within the Bhutanese cultural conceptions of interconnectedness.

The third proposition we take-away from our research is that the framing of non-cognitive skills in such human capital and economic development language – from Bowles and Gintis, to Heckman and colleagues – is an attempt to uncouple it from the complicated history in education of ‘moral education’ or ‘values education’ or, indeed, ‘character education’. Indeed, it

may be safer to couch the language of morals and values within national economic development, invoking patriotism instead of moral hierarchy and preference, or invoking the phrase ‘21<sup>st</sup> century skills’. We see irony here as current trends in non-cognitive skills create new language such as ‘grit’ and ‘growth mindset’ that are old wine in new bottles – the preferential values of a certain economic class. The convergent discourse of ‘21<sup>st</sup> century skills’ was striking to see in both England and in Bhutan. There also is the makings of a global trend in the merging – or confusing – of citizenship education and character education and non-cognitive skills.

Conceptually, the formation of the ‘good’ citizen with the conflation of ‘good’ character raises questions about *whose* citizenship and character is valued, such as the current discourse in Canada (Joshee and Thomas 2017), in India (Bhandari 2014), or in England (Biesta 2011; Kisby 2017). This also appears to be the case in Bhutan, as initiatives such as the Universal Human Values curriculum fades away and its ideas reappear in the planning on a revitalised citizenship education curriculum. As we found in the English schools we visited, there is a wide variety of mixed-signals being sent with the emphasis on British Values and the requirement of spiritual, moral, social and cultural development (SMSC).

The final proposition that we take-away from our research is on how teachers respond to the policy and societal expectations of that are imposed upon them in the name of accountability, measurability, and learning outcomes. Both English and Bhutanese teachers we interviewed felt these pressures of achievement and outcomes, but responded in divergent ways. In particular, we found that the English teachers we interviewed found many ways to fit in non-cognitive and social skill teaching in both creative and pragmatic ways. This is exactly what Cuban (2009) calls ‘hugging the middle’, in which teachers use their discretion and limited autonomy to their advantage to advance a hybrid of pedagogy and curriculum imposed from above. We also found

the English teachers we interviewed pushing back against further top-down policy dictums shaping non-cognitive skills in the classroom. In Bhutan, we found a slightly different relationship between teacher and policy, in which the teachers we interviewed stuck much more closely to ‘the script’ of curricular materials and indicated their reluctance to situate their role outside of the ‘official’ curriculum and policy. There is a clash between Education for GNH values and an education system built upon the principles of competition and exclusion (Schuelka 2013). The Bhutanese teachers we interviewed continue to view their role primarily as deliverers of academic content. There are, of course, exceptions to this found at every level – particularly within those Bhutanese schools with leadership that go above and beyond the expectations of their academic provision. This was particularly evident in the Thimphu school we observed, in which there were numerous curricular and extra-curricular activities to promote Buddhist values, social inclusivity, a lifelong love of learning, and environmental awareness. These activities only happened because of the strong personality of the school principal, and not through any sort of governmental policy or expectation, and are the exception. Education for GNH does promote a more holistic, student-centred, and progressive vision for education (Schuelka 2013). This is not to say that Bhutan could be undergoing the same shift from teacher-centred to student-centred classrooms as in Cuban’s (2009) American context, or as in the English context, but we do not view this deterministically or with any sense of linearity.

To conclude our article, we return to our original research questions. The experience of teachers with ‘non-cognitive skills’ has been mostly a lack of familiarity with this specific term from both the English and Bhutanese teachers. However, the English teachers have other language and phrasing that mostly gets at the same concept, whilst also putting these skills within already-existing character and citizenship education discourses. To many of the

Bhutanese teachers we interviewed, thinking about other aspects beyond academic content as a ‘skill’ was new. However, there were some Bhutanese teachers that embraced initiatives such as Educating for GNH, often based on the position and advocacy of their school leadership teams, and many teachers saw their role as cultural ambassadors promoting Bhutanese cultural norms such as *driglam namzha* and Buddhist values. There are not any current measurements of non-cognitive skill learning outcomes in either England or Bhutan, although both countries have some frameworks in place to promote their inclusion – for example, Educating for GNH in Bhutan and British Values in England. The English teachers universally rejected any calls for non-cognitive skills to be further assessed and measured, or further embedded in the curriculum as a stand-alone activity. The Bhutanese teachers were more mixed on this prospect, but a majority suggested that non-cognitive skills would only be taken seriously if it were assessed and made a full-fledged part of the curriculum.

In this article, we have not cemented an answer to ‘what schools should teach’, nor do we believe there will ever really be answer to this question. However, we have tried to provide some cross-cultural perspective, as well as a perspective from those teachers ‘in the trenches’ of education. Despite the criticisms and controversies surrounding non-cognitive skills, character education, citizenship education, values education, and the like, nevertheless we are encouraged by the discourse that continues to push schools to go beyond merely factories of cognitive learning; and to treat students as complex, diverse, and holistic human beings. We certainly advocate for the continual questioning and critical analysis of the politics and ideologies surrounding non-cognitive skills in the, perhaps, quixotic attempt to understand what should schools teach, and what education is for.

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