

The cultural production of the 'disabled' person

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The Cultural Production of the ‘Disabled’ Person: Constructing Difference in Bhutanese Schools

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Short-form title: Constructing ‘Disability’ in Bhutanese Schools

Abstract: The Himalayan country of Bhutan has witnessed monumental social and cultural changes in only the last fifty years with the implementation and institutionalization of secular schooling. This ‘modern’ schooling has also served to newly construct and produce ‘disabled’ persons. Through a year of ethnographic fieldwork, I explored this construction of disability through the institution of schooling, and have organized these observations into four themes: physical, pedagogical, curricular, and linguistic.

Key words: Disability, Education, Bhutan, Cultural Production

The Bhutanese Landscape: Literally and Figuratively

The early Spring sun breaks through the Thimphu valley, edging above the mountain peaks and inducing the apple blossoms and rhododendron flowers to shake off their dewy sparkle. Bhutanese children pour up the steep hill, climbing to the school above them. They are mostly in groups, laughing and joking with few adults present. Some children have walked for kilometers, while others have arrived at the bottom of the hill in cars, taxis, buses, and on the backs of the Tata trucks that precariously cling to the sides of steep mountain passes.

Children wear the national dress of Bhutan. The boys wear *gho*, a robe-like garment that is folded and held above the knees by a tight *kerā* [belt]. One of the practical features of the *gho* is that it produces a handy pocket in the front; in which boys can stuff their notebooks, pens, and discovered treasures. The girls wear *kira*, which is a full-length skirt also folded and held by a

kera. In contemporary Bhutan, girls and women commonly wear a half-*kira* and wear a *tego*, or jacket, made of silk.

The children carry their plastic lunch baskets: usually containing rice, *ema datsi* [chilies and cheese], *dal* [lentils], and *shakam* [dried meat]; but also featuring packaged dried raman noodles [in Bhutan typically called *Wai Wai* or *Maggi*, after the brand names], boxes of sugary fruit drink, and small packages of flavored crisps. On the children's backs were rucksacks adorned with images ranging from Yu-Gi-Oh, Angry Birds, and Hello Kitty; to the logos of football clubs such as Chelsea, Arsenal, Barcelona, and Real Madrid.

As the children continue to stream into the school, they are largely en masse and indistinguishable from each other. However, once the school bell rings, they suddenly become different. Students of various ages and abilities are institutionally sorted. They become captured, entangled, and culturally produced to embody identities placed upon them such as 'gifted', 'normal', 'lazy', and 'disabled' – to use the words I often heard in Bhutanese schools. While this ability-identity construction is far from unique in Bhutan – indeed, it is a ubiquitous global schooling practice – the truly unique view from Bhutan is that the idea of schooling as a social institution has radically changed within just one generation.

Only fifty years ago, almost no children in Bhutan would have gone to any type of secular school. A very elite few attended grammar schools in India, primarily the Jesuit schools in Darjeeling, and more volunteered – or were sent – to the Buddhist monastic education system for a lifelong pursuit of religious scholarship. However, the vast majority of the Bhutanese population before 1959 lived an agrarian lifestyle in which education of culture and self-sufficiency was contained within the family unit. There was no system of written language. Beginning in 1959, the Third *Druk Gyalpo* [Dragon King], Jigme Dorji Wangchuck, initiated an

ambitious process of ‘modernization’ that included the institutionalization of formal secular schooling. While growing in fits and starts, and largely importing Hindi curriculum in its early days, the Bhutanese school system today features over 2,000 schools/institutes/training centers and serves almost 219,000 students – almost a quarter of the entire Bhutanese population (MoE 2014).

The introduction of formal ‘modern’ schoolingⁱ in Bhutan shifted the position and function of school in society. School became a place where every child would now go, to learn exogenously-produced knowledge, with the expectation that success in school would equal success as an adult. The ‘ideology of achievement’ (Demerath 2009) and the cultural production of the ‘educated person’ (Levinson and Holland 1996) – or, I would argue, the ‘abled’ person – has become paramount in the Bhutanese educational narrative. On the flipside, however, is the production of the ‘disabled’ person that is being newly constructed through the socio-cultural institution of schooling. Before school became a primary social institution, ‘disability’ in Bhutan was constructed culturally and religiously through narratives around ‘body-completeness’, *karma*, and a strong pull toward ‘sameness’ to promote social cohesion and group identity ([author] 2015). Now school, as a socio-cultural institution, is creating all new categories and labels of difference and learning difficulty.

In this article, I will explore the question: What socio-cultural structures exist in Bhutanese schools today that construct ‘disabled’ students? This question is based upon the relatively recent attempt by the Royal Government of Bhutan to identify and label ‘children with disabilities’ and to promote their inclusion in mainstream schools ([author] 2013). The inconsistency and uncertainty of medical disability diagnoses, but their increasing frequency due to global disability-scapes ([author] 2015) – and the lack of clear policies and central guidance for schools

to properly identify, place, and support ‘students with disabilities’ – leads to school actors more heavily relying upon socio-cultural institutional notions of what and *who* schools are for. The case of Bhutan was attractive to me as an ethnographic project because its societal shift from ‘education for very few’ to ‘education for all’ has major implications for how schools as a socio-cultural institution handle heterogeneity and student difference. Add to this the Buddhist-influenced development philosophy of Gross National Happiness unique to Bhutan, as well as its relatively recent entrance into globalization, and Bhutan is a fascinating case of complexity and nuance. There is very little research on disability in Bhutan, and there was also great opportunity to fill gaps in the literature.

This article is theoretically centered around the notion that disability is constructed through socio-cultural institutions, borrowing a framework from Bradley Levinson and Dorothy Holland (1996) with a lens from Hervé Varenne and Ray McDermott (1998; McDermott 1993; McDermott and Varenne 1995). The anthropological precedent for this argument is explained in the next section, explaining in more detail how schools as socio-cultural institutions shape students and their identities. Following this explanation of theoretical considerations, I will outline the methodology. I will then parse the exploration of disabling socio-cultural structures in Bhutanese schools into four themes: physical, pedagogical, curricular, and linguistic.

Anthropology, Disability, and Education: Theoretical Considerations

From the very beginning of the specific study of education via an anthropological lens, the central tenet of such a discipline was to recognize that education is a process that produces and reproduces culture through the *recruitment* and *maintenance* of cultural norms (Spindler 2000). Many educational social scientists have conducted studies that demonstrate that schools are not

only sites of *reproducing* existing socio-cultural-economic structures, but also sites of cultural *production* themselves (i.e Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Demerath 1999; Foley 1990; Fordham and Ogbu, 1986; Willis 1977). Most importantly to this article, the edited volume *The Cultural Production of the Educated Person* (Levinson and Holland 1996) advanced the idea that schooling – or the school site itself – is a dialectic interplay between structure and agency and the “formation of subjectivities through the production and consumption of cultural forms” (Levinson and Holland 1996:13–14).

While I accept that “students in schools ... may produce practices and identities consonant with local cultural notions of the ‘educated person’” while others may challenge these practices or produce cultured identities against the ‘educated person’ (Levinson and Holland 1996: 21), it is also important to recognize that “culture has less to do with the habits we acquire than with the houses we inhabit” (Varenne and McDermott 1998: 14). In other words, what Hervé Varenne and Ray McDermott (1998) are suggesting is that the institution of schooling produces its identities of success and failure through the interdependent symbolism and meaning-making practices of the people that constitute the institution itself. In a different piece of writing, they argue, “One cannot be disabled alone” (McDermott and Varenne 1995: 337). Using Varenne and McDermott’s (1995) semantic argument that ‘without literacy there would be no illliteracy’, I believe that it can also be applied to Levinson and Holland in that ‘without an educated person there would be no *un*-educated person’. The production of the meaning of being *un*-educated, or ‘disabled’ if you will, is an institutional practice in which everyone is in some way a participant.

In the field of anthropology, the study of disability is a small but growing area. Scholars such as Devva Kasnitz and Russell Shuttleworth (2001) and Faye Ginsburg and Rayna Rapp (2013) argue that the study of difference, otherness, stigma, personhood, and cultural participation make

anthropology and disability studies naturally interdisciplinary. A plethora of ethnographic/ethnohistorical disability explorations have been conducted since the 1960s (e.g. Ablon 1984; Edgerton 1993; Groce 1985; Jenkins and Barrett 2004; Kohrman 2005; Nakamura 2006; Scott 1969). These studies, among others, are fairly segmented from each other although linked by the same notion that disability is a socio-cultural construction. An important contribution is the work of Benedicte Ingstad and Susan Reynolds Whyte (1995; 2010). Their focus on the relationship between social organization and human difference also serves as a natural bridge to the study of anthropology, disability, *and* education. Robert Rueda and Hugh Mehan (1986) have used the anthropological concepts of ‘passing’, earlier taken up in the 1960s by Robert Edgerton (1993), to investigate disability identity. Another study by Scot Danforth and Virginia Navarro (2001) uses the social construction lens to interrogate the discursive use of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) terminology in schools.

One of the most widely covered areas of anthropology, disability, and education is the issue of disability categorization and labelling in schools. Regina Smardon (2008) argues that disability narratives and disability labels are cultural objects, and her study of a small Appalachian community “focuses on the way that labels (cultural objects produced by experts) are deployed within narratives (cultural objects produced by laypersons)” (162). Hugh Mehan (1993) and Rebecca Rogers (2002) identify, through separate but similar studies, that institutional and technical discourses in special education meetings produce ‘deficit discourses’ and student identities are shaped by categorical labels. The institutionalization of student difference and ability, from a cultural perspective, can also be found in Kathryn Anderson-Levitt’s (1996) work.

The anthropological issue – and, in turn, the anthropological contribution – is that categorization, labeling, identity construction, segregation, and membership gatekeeping are *recruited* and *maintained* through the socio-cultural institutional structures of schooling. In other words, the ‘disabled’ student is culturally produced through the institution of schooling. However, this is not to say that there is not agency occurring at the same time within disabling structures. For example, the notion of Deaf Culture in schools is particularly pronounced (i.e. Hayashi and Tobin 2015; Nakamura 2006), and AnnMarie Baines (2014) aptly explores the institutional construction of ‘disabled academic identities’ and the agency and resistance to produce counter-disabled identities that empower students.

Throughout all of the works mentioned above in this brief literature review, there is an analysis of the interplay between socio-cultural structures within an institution and the productive agency of the individual within that structure. Based on the literature, and emerging from my own ethnographic fieldwork, I identify four key themes in which to organize my own exploration of how the Bhutanese school as an institution produces the ‘disabled person’: physical, pedagogical, curricular, and linguistic. Before I get to the specific discussion of Bhutanese schools, I will explain my methodology employed in the next section.

Methodology

This research was theoretically built upon the argument that schools produce ‘educated’ or ‘abled persons’ while also – conversely – producing ‘disabled persons’ through the socio-cultural structures of schooling as an institution. In order to probe this topic ethnographically, a comparative case study (Bartlett and Vavrus 2014) was conducted. The overall research project was an exploration of the multi-dimensionality of the new inclusive education policies and

disability discourses that were being appropriated in Bhutan, which culminated in the completion of my doctoral dissertation ([author] 2014). This article focuses specifically on the construction of the ‘disabled person’ in Bhutanese schools through socio-cultural school structures, meaning, and organization, but only lightly touches upon policy or socio-cultural constructions of disability in Bhutanese society writ large. These are matters for other articles; already published ([author] 2015; Rinchen Dorji and [author] 2016) and currently under-review.

Data was collected for this research project over one year of ethnographic fieldwork in Bhutan from 2012 until 2013. During that time, I taught at a local college but went on site visits roughly 2-3 times per week. While I tried to remain mostly an observer in classrooms, I did find myself continually pulled into class activities and solicited for strategies and advice. To give a brief description of my background that may inform or influence my research, I was a trained special educator and inclusion facilitator in the United States and have worked with students with disabilities in various educational settings before weaving my way through academia. I reject the idea of ‘global best practices’ in any aspect of education, and if solicited for pedagogical advice from my participants I encouraged them to engage in their own reflective practice.

During fieldwork in Bhutan, four schools were visited frequently, with one in particular – Thimphu Public School (pseudonym) – being my main school site. The other schools I visited regularly included: one government school located in a small village in the higher elevations within Thimphu *dzongkhag* [district] – Mountain Village School (pseudonym), one private school with a focus on inclusive education – Thimphu Inclusive School (pseudonym), and one school that was a charity special school for students with moderate to severe disabilities – Thimphu Special School (pseudonym).ⁱⁱ Other types of sites included two non-governmental organizations, two governmental organizations, and six special events or conferences. All of the

sites were in the Thimphu or Paro *dzongkhags*, which is a representational limitation for my direct observations and interviews, but every attempt was made to find informants with knowledge of other *dzongkhags* for comparison.

At the time of fieldwork, there were eight pilot schools in Bhutan that were designated as ‘Special Educational Needs (SEN) Schools’. At the time of this writing, there is a plan in place to increase this number to 22 (Rinchen Dorji and [author] 2016). Most student with ‘disabilities’ in Bhutan either attend a SEN School, a handful of private schools or charities that will take them, or they do not attend school at all. As I mentioned above, my understanding is that there is no formal medical process for diagnosing disabilities, and this does not serve as a condition to receive special educational services. From my observations, it seemed that the label of ‘disability’ was mutually agreed upon by school personnel and, sometimes, parents. Children in what some in other contexts might be labelled as having ‘hidden disabilities’ were not often officially given a disability label but were more often labeled as ‘slow’, ‘lazy’, or ‘not clever’. I will discuss this in more detail below. While there are two government-run special schools specific to visual impairment and hearing impairment respectively, these are attached to mainstream schools. There is only one special school for children seen as having ‘moderate to severe physical and intellectual disabilities’ⁱⁱⁱ, Thimphu Special School. Though statistics vary wildly, the Ministry of Education (2014) estimates that 5% of the eligible student population do not attend any school. In another wildly variable statistic, ‘students with disabilities’ make up less than 1% of the student population as a whole (Rinchen Dorji and [author] 2016), but a survey overseen by UNICEF (National Statistics Bureau 2012) puts the disability prevalence rate for 2-9 year olds at 21%. Part of this variability can be attributed to survey methodology, but also to how students are formally and informally categorized as having a ‘disability’.

Through interviews and focus groups conducted, in all there were an estimated 126 participants consisting of students, teachers, parents, school personnel, government officials, therapists, specialists, social workers, and other relevant professionals. Informal conversations and semi-formal interviews were conducted in English, as this is the language used in the Bhutanese education system. Direct classroom observations were conducted and recorded in a field notebook, making 'jottings' to follow-up in future observations and with post-observation analytic memoing. Observations did not follow any specific tool or protocol, but followed the ethnographic observational techniques suggested by Robert Emerson, Rachel Fretz, and Linda Shaw (2011).

Much of the data analysis of classroom observations, interviews, and focus groups occurred in an open and concurrent coding design in which themes emerged via grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss 2008) and also through the use of analytic memos (Saldaña 2009). Away from the field, fieldnotes and transcripts were inductively coded using first-cycle and axial coding techniques (Saldaña 2009). As mentioned previously, my ethnographic research project in Bhutan involved more than just the topic presented here and involved numerous other themes and codes to do with inclusive education policy, education policy borrowing, and comparative education theory. Some of my other research questions involved the use of *a priori* coding, but the findings presented here for this specific research question did not. Analytic memos and axial coding provided the themes of physical, pedagogical, curricular, and linguistic constructions of the 'disabled' person to which I will elaborate below.

In terms of triangulation, I employed the Constant Validity Check method (Bernard 2011) while in the field. This involved member-checking information and inconsistencies from other interviews and observations, and demonstrating an openness to exploring alternative

explanations and outliers with my informants and through my own interpretation. In the subsequent sections below, I will use a series of vignettes to present some of the findings. Vignettes are a way of simplifying a vast collection of data into representative scenes of contextual richness, as suggested by Matthew Miles and Michael Huberman (1994). All of the vignettes presented below are taken directly from observation fieldnotes or analytic memos.

Constructing the 'Disabled Person'

There are four themes in which I explore how socio-cultural structures in schooling as an institution produce 'disabled students' in Bhutan: physical, pedagogical, curricular, and linguistic. While these socio-cultural structures are unique to Bhutan in certain ways, they are by no means absent in other school systems around the world. Indeed, the key findings from Bhutan can be generalizable and applied to many diverse settings.

Physical Production The first socio-cultural structure that produces a 'disabled student' is that of the physical environment. In terms of physical structures that disable, the reality of the geographic and topographic location of Bhutan plays a significant role. Bhutan, being situated entirely in the Himalaya, is a land of mountains and valleys and the Bhutanese life is lived vertically. This is, of course, problematic for those persons with mobility restrictions that use assistive technology such as a wheelchair. The use of a wheelchair is practically impossible except in the largest urban areas, and even there the terrain is steep. A human-made problem, however, is the poor maintenance of infrastructure and the lack of accessible or universally-designed thoroughfares and entrances. There are some ramps here and there, but these are often too steep to use comfortably. As a result, persons with mobility restrictions either have to be carried or they are homebound.

The condition of schools is also a mixture of geographic reality and human-made design. Some schools that I visited – for example, Thimphu Public School – did have adequate ramps for persons with physical disabilities. The majority of schools I visited – including those not identified as primary research sites – did not. At the time of my fieldwork, only around 60% of schools had access to a road (MoE 2012a). These statistics vary quite widely from more urban *dzongkhags* [districts] such as Thimphu, where road access is 98%, to rural southern *dzongkhags* like Zhemgang, where road access is only 40% (MoE 2012a). The lack of road access and ramps is a significant barrier for physical accessibility, which constructs disabilities by creating educational spaces that are for some bodies and not for others.

In all the primary classrooms I visited, the physical set-up of the space was of large tables with students packed around them in plastic chairs. Secondary-level classrooms were more of a mix of worktables, shared desks, and individual desks. The physical space of the classroom was often overwhelmed by a sea of frenetic little student bodies. In the urban areas, the average student-teacher ratio I observed was around 50:1. Putting aside the pedagogical implications of this for now, the physical implications are that students are often vying for space and physically in contact with others almost constantly. For most Bhutanese children, I observed a very high degree of physicality – arms around shoulders, the flicking of ears, the holding of hands, etc. Mostly this was welcomed by other children, but I did observe some uncomfortable physical interactions between ‘students with disabilities’^{iv} and their ‘mainstream’ peers in which antagonizing physical contact because of close proximity triggered aggression.

Bhutan is certainly not unique in its struggle to provide accessible and adequate school facilities, so I do not wish to single it out specifically. As I stated earlier, Bhutan is a victim of its own topography which makes any construction project exponentially difficult. However, how

schools are designed is a product of school as a socio-cultural institution. School buildings with age and ability-grouped rooms with students in chairs and tables is a particular set of schooling symbols. These attributes contribute to the production of the 'disabled student' by valuing those students that can make the climb to school, can still learn while being minimally comfortable, or do not need much light to read the words on the page or the blackboard. The school is made for certain children and not designed for others.

Staffing decisions and policy-funding decisions are structural elements that can lead to exclusion and shape the identity of 'students with disabilities'. There is a significant absence of other professionals working in schools besides teachers in terms of specialists, classroom aides, and other educational support staff. Currently, classroom teachers receive very little training on successfully teaching in heterogeneous classrooms (Rinchen Dorji and [author] 2016). Without the presence of staff resources, and presented with teachers with very little training, students are left to their own devices to either sink or swim. This specifically impacts children that already may be struggling or are disadvantaged through a variety of structural inequalities. Even getting to the stage of being in the classroom presents a physical challenge for some students, as was discussed above.

Bhutanese teachers inherited a British-Indian legacy of severe teacher-centered practices (Dewan 1991; Gupta 2006; Kumar 1988), not to mention the existing Buddhist monastic educational tradition that emphasized rote memorization, mimicry, and downplayed enquiry and critical questioning (Karma Phuntsho 2000). These views of education in which knowledge is static and objectively approached through strict independent study and whole-group lectures was constructed at a time when formal schooling was only available for a narrow minority of the population that excelled at that kind of learning. However, in Bhutan in the 21st century the

context has changed dramatically with the expectation that *all* children go to school. A reconceptualization of schooling as an inclusive social institution has not occurred, particularly pedagogically. Below, I will provide examples of some encounters with the pedagogical construction of ‘disability’ in Bhutanese schools.

Pedagogical Production The second socio-cultural structure that produces a ‘disabled student’ is that of pedagogy. The first area of this pedagogical production that I will highlight is the issue noted above of under-trained and under-resourced teachers. The field note vignette below is taken from an observation conducted at Thimphu Special School:

In this classroom there are 8 students (identified by staff as having ‘moderate to severe disabilities’). There is no teacher for at least 30 minutes. There is a strong smell of urine in the classroom, but the source is unknown. The teacher eventually turns up. He drills them on multiplication facts, going from student to student and demanding “ 7×4 .” No one knew the answer. Eventually, the teacher grows frustrated and tells them that it is “28” and moves on without checking for understanding or telling them how to solve the math problem. Students are hitting each other, but the teacher cannot see them [he is visually impaired]. No students intervene. The teacher is called out of the classroom, and some students continue to study, but not very assiduously. Mostly, the students are trying to memorize the multiplication table. The teacher does not return to the classroom for the rest of the day, nearly one hour before the end of the school day, and the students are left on their own with no adult supervision. (Field notes, [author] 2014)

In this pedagogical instance, the teacher does not demonstrate pedagogical content knowledge or elicit student thinking, instead simply telling the students the answer to a multiplication problem without an attention towards the metacognitive problem-solving process.

The teacher is ‘filling in’ student thinking (Boerst 2015), which may work for some students but will most certainly disable others that need more scaffolding in order to learn.

The most common pedagogical style I encountered in Bhutan was the call-and-response method of whole-group instruction. The teacher would ask the whole-class a question and the whole-class would respond in unison. The following observation in my field notes – taken from Thimphu Public School – represents a typical classroom exchange in primary school:

The teacher holds up a flower [*metho*, in Dzongkha] and several other different kinds of plants (tomato [*lam bendha*], chili [*ema*], betel [*paney*], etc.), lecturing about the differences between flowers and other plants. She employs a call-and-response method during the lecture, where she asks a question and the students respond in unison. As I look around the room, not all students are responding to the group questions, but the absence of their voices is not felt in the volume of the students that are literally shouting the answers. The teacher is unable to discern if all students are participating just from volume alone. The teacher draws a chart on the chalkboard of flowering and non-flowering plants, taping several of the items [plants] that she has collected to the chart. She then instructs the students to draw this chart in their notebooks. The students take to the task, and begin working together to make their charts, copying each other at their tables of 6–7 students. The students with disabilities are mostly integrated and spread out in the classroom. I comment on this to the teacher during work time, and the teacher informs me that mixed-ability grouping works well because the students with disabilities can copy from other students to get the right answers. (Field Notes, [author] 2014)

Given that the student to teacher ratio in this observation was 50:1, and that at least 12 children had been identified as having a ‘disability’, there are limited pedagogical responses

besides a call-and-response technique. The teacher is essentially caught up in a system of schooling that values the student that can learn information in such a manner. A unison response to a whole-group question masks the student that does not understand or quietly verbalizes an answer that is reasonable but incorrect. There is little time for one teacher – without the assistance of inclusion facilitators and classroom aides – to effectively assess and elicit student understanding. I frequently observed this teacher continually distracted by one particular student in the classroom – one of 50 – that in a different context might have been labelled as having a ‘social emotional behavioral disorder’. Without proper personnel support, the teacher must constantly balance the needs of the individual student with the needs of the group. Thus, students become ‘disabled’ because the socio-cultural structure of the institution of schooling maintains a preference toward homogeneity and rewards students that do not require anything ‘special’.

If call-and-response pedagogy can disable students through its inattention to individual learning and understanding, a hyper-focus on individual understanding in front of the whole class can have similarly disabling effects. The following vignette from my fieldnotes demonstrates this, taken from an observation at Thimphu Special School (Fieldnotes, [author] 2014):

The students sit outside on the porch, most of them on the floor. This group of 25 students are from the ‘Advanced’ grouping of students of secondary school age. There are several adults present – volunteers mostly – but there is one main teacher at the end of the porch. The lesson today is on sign language, which all students learn at Thimphu Special School, regardless of their hearing level [...] The lesson goes in the following manner: the teacher gives a sign, spells out the word, gives the sign-word, and the students repeat. This happens over and over again, and focuses entirely on vocabulary words. One student is getting bored and has stopped paying attention. The teacher hits the

student with a book to get him to pay attention. This student is then made to stand and demonstrate the lesson as a punishment for his inattentiveness. The student struggles with the signs, having a scared ‘deer in the headlights’ look across his face. The adults and other students laugh at the standing student for his mistakes, and eventually he sits down, embarrassed and ashamed. Another student is asked to stand, and this student also struggles to demonstrate the lesson. The teacher chastises the students, makes fun of her, and talks about the student’s abilities to the other adults present (including myself). The students with hearing impairment, those that are fairly fluent in sign, are pretty bored in the back of the student group. The standing up, the struggling, the chastisement, and the fear and shame repeat itself over and over again.

This observation represents another common occurrence in my time spent in Bhutanese classrooms; a student that obviously does not understand the lesson is singled out in front of the class and made to feel worse because of it. There is a pervasive cultural attitude towards education in Bhutan that actuates it in the harshest and strictest of terms. Physical violence, fear, and shame were all deployed as pedagogical techniques in many Bhutanese classrooms I observed. I believe that this is related to its history with British-Indian colonial education mixing with older Buddhist monastic education practices, but more research is needed to explicitly make this causal claim.

Well-trained teachers in inclusive and universal-design techniques certainly can go a long way in lessening the impact of the pedagogical production of the ‘disabled’ person. The Ministry of Education in Bhutan has made some strides in increasing pedagogical knowledge through an emphasis on Educating for Gross National Happiness (Kezang Sherab, Maxwell and Cooksey 2016) and a more progressive student-centered model via UNICEF’s child-friendly schools

initiative (Rinchen Dorji 2006). However, the effectiveness of such a policy is diminished in the face of a stubborn history and culture of strict teacher-centered practice (Kezang Sherab, Maxwell and Cooksey 2016). The Bhutanese students also produce this culture themselves, as in this exchange I had with students in a focus group at a Mountain Village School (Focus Group, [author] 2014):

Student 2: If teacher beats student, then they will be sad.

[author]: Does that ever happen at this school, that the teacher beats students?

Student 3: Yes, many teachers before would hit, Sir.

[author]: With a hand or a stick?

Students: Yes

[author]: With both?

Student 3: Yes, but the government makes the rule not to beat student. Now teachers are thinking about new punishment. Making students stand for long time at assembly and pulling ears. Making students stand outside for one hour.

[author]: Do you think that's good? That teachers are that strict?

Students: Yes Sir.

[author]: Why?

Student 1: It is good that student thinks that if they do naughty that teacher will punish them.

They will do good work Sir.

Student 2: If the teacher not punish them, they will continue to be naughty.

[author]: Are you ever afraid in the classroom?

Students: Yes Sir.

[author]: Is that helpful or is it better if you weren't afraid of the teachers?

Students: Helpful.

[author]: Helpful?

Students: Yes Sir.

Student 3: If teachers are not strict, the students are talking when teachers are trying to teach the other students, are making lots of noise, disturbing by throwing papers. If the teachers are strict, they will concentrate on studies.

[author]: What happens when you answer a question wrong?

Student 4: You feel nervous.

Student 5: It is better not to make a mistake than to try.

Within this educational culture being produced by teachers and students themselves, the value of ability is narrowed once more as only the students that know the correct answers the first time are supported to advance through the system in a positive way.

The issue of corporal punishment in Bhutanese schools is very present in media and societal discourse at the moment. Appalling school abuse cases have captured and enthralled national attention (e.g. Pokhrel 2014; Tanden Zangmo 2012; Yangchen Rinzen 2015). Physical violence towards students in schools was officially banned by the Ministry of Education in 2008.

However, the policy failed to teach Bhutanese teachers other positive means of carrying out classroom discipline. Many teachers I interviewed were exasperated by their diminished authoritative role in the classroom, and they were desperate for new techniques that could help with their classroom management. For example, a teacher at Thimphu Inclusive School told me, “the will is there, but we are severely lacking in techniques and expertise [in classroom

management]” (Interview, [author], 2014). There is a perception of a ‘youth problem’ in Bhutan today, based partially on the lack of school discipline (Lham Dorji 2009).

Despite the policy decree, corporal punishment is still rampant in Bhutanese schools and identified as a major factor in problems of retention (MoE 2009; Sonam Tenzin, 2006). An educational administrator told me the number one question that he receives from parents about his institution, rather than the quality of the instructors or the progressiveness of the teaching, was about “how strict are we with our rules and discipline” (Interview, [author] 2014). There is still a strong perception, regardless of the extreme cases, that schools *should* be a harsh environment and that knowledge can only be ‘won’ through hard work, determination, endurance, and ability. This zero-sum attitude towards education – that others win while others must lose (i.e. McDermott and Varenne 1995) – is exactly the socio-cultural structure that produces ‘students with disabilities’ in Bhutanese classrooms. The lack of knowledge and expertise in facilitating a classroom full of heterogeneity also fuels the skepticism and negative attitude toward inclusive education. Through my informal interviews and observations, I found that the frustration teachers felt in the lack of ‘good’ student behavior reinforced their belief that school should only be for those children that demonstrated abilities within the narrow teacher-centered pedagogical window.

The last vignette from my fieldnotes on the pedagogical production of disability in Bhutanese schools brings together the two themes of under-trained and under-resourced teaching staff and the socio-cultural expectation of fear and violence in Bhutanese education. This scene occurred at Thimphu Special School (Fieldnotes, [author] 2014):

The primary-aged students [approx. 10] are given a coloring task, although with no clear curricular goal observed. One student – who has labelled as having ‘severe autism’ – is

not doing the task and is wandering around the classroom and disrupting other students.

The volunteer teacher and parent volunteer hits this student with pieces of bamboo, trying to get him to behave ... Finally, they take this student out of the classroom and isolate him in an adjacent room; unsupervised in the woodshop filled with machinery and saws.

The teacher leaves the classroom unannounced and does not return ... The parent volunteer chases after students, trying to guide their behavior after-the-fact, using the bamboo stick to hit students when she feels it is necessary. The students mimic the actions of the adults, using physical punishment on each other and against the adults themselves. Eventually, the student with 'severe autism' is let back into the classroom, but is tied to a chair so that he cannot cause trouble. He protests but to no avail.

While this example may be an extreme case, it nonetheless demonstrates the production of the 'disabled student' through pedagogical practice. I do not wish to misplace blame on the teachers above as being the sole disabling factor. Rather, these teachers – professional and volunteer alike – are part of the larger institution of schooling that recruits and maintains them. I would consider teachers to be part of the structural cultural fabric of the school institution as a whole. The fact that their curriculum above was centered mostly around coloring pictures and playing with toys is another factor to consider next.

Curricular Production The third socio-cultural structure that produces a 'disabled student' is that of the curriculum. Schools cannot produce anything without content and assessment. Specifically, I will discuss the centralized control of educational curriculum and the role of high-stakes examinations.

Bhutan – like many other countries – has a centralized education system overseen by a Ministry of Education. While a decentralization of governmental representation has come down

to the local village level in recent years (Karma Ura 2009), education remains standardized across the country. Standardization can be helpful in many ways to ensure equality and common practice, but it can also limit local responsiveness for resources and appropriate adaptation to student needs (Weiler 1990). In all schools I visited, the curriculum was the same for both general education students and students identified as having disabilities. In practice, the result of this was that teachers spent little time adapting materials or differentiating the curriculum to make it more inclusive and instead simply kept students on curriculum that was many class-levels below them.

For example, at Thimphu Public School, an English pull-out class for students identified as having disabilities were receiving lessons from a Class I curriculum book, but they were in Classes VI and VII. The Class I curriculum consisted of picture books and workbooks filled with animals, children, and games. Teachers at Thimphu Public School shared that they did not feel comfortable using other materials because either they did not have access to them, or because they felt that they needed to follow the government curriculum (Interviews, [author] 2014). In the case of the students in Class VI and VII, they had received the *same* lesson from the *same* book since Class I, with little advancement to show from it. Teachers at Thimphu Public School felt that they could not move them on in the curriculum if they had not at least partially mastered it (Interviews, [author] 2014).

Against what I had expected, I found little stigma associated with the use of non age-appropriate materials in Bhutanese classrooms. When I interviewed students about this they informed me that that it was no problem that someone was using a different reader or were learning different materials. “It’s okay, Sir,” said one informant, Class IV, “because we are all at the level that we can learn” (Interview, [author] 2014). At Mountain Village School, I

interviewed two students in Class IV – one that was 15 years old, and another that was around 18 years old (age somewhat unclear). Both students were identified by the Principal and the teachers as ‘having disabilities,’ but they had never been formally diagnosed. The 15 year-old blamed herself for remaining in Class IV, and said that she “didn’t put enough effort in to pass the classes” (Interview, [author] 2014). Both students indicated that they had friends in Class IV and were not teased too much because of it, but at the same time both students produced their own identity as being ‘disabled’ and deserved of their retention.

One of the reasons that I suspect there is less stigma associated with out-of-age materials and students, is that out-of-age students in Bhutan is a widespread phenomenon. In Pre-Primary (kindergarten), the ‘right-age’ student population is only around 50%, and by Class XII the ‘right-age’ student population hovers closer to 20% (MoE 2012a). There are several reasons for this, but primarily it has to do with an educational system that is still novel and picking up children – especially in rural areas – not always at the right age when they enter the system. Culturally, knowledge is viewed as fixed, built sequentially, and exists independently from age-appropriate development. Thus, it is not strange that a 21 year-old is studying a Class I picture book of *Momo the Monkey*.

The belief in fixed knowledge and the phenomenon of so many out-of-age students in Bhutanese schools is exacerbated by a high-stakes testing and assessment culture. At every class level, students are administered an end-of-the-year exam that determines whether or not the student will advance into the next grade. This is a stressful time of year for the students, and involves *all* students from pre-primary to Class XII. In Class VIII, all students must take the Lower Secondary School Certificate Examination (LSSCE). At the end of Basic Education, or Class X, students take a high-stakes test called the Bhutan Certificate of Secondary Education

Examination (BCSE). This determines whether or not the student will be allowed to attend Classes XI–XII, and whether or not they will be government supported. While about 97% of the students that sit for the BCSE pass the exam, only 40% of the top students are offered the chance to attend government higher secondary schools. Another 31% of the students that pass the BCSE go to private Higher Secondary schools (MoE 2012a). After Class XII, students again take a high-stakes examination – the Bhutan Higher Secondary Education Certificate (BHSEC) – for the chance to enter tertiary education. The BHSEC only has an 86% pass rate and there are only a limited number of placements for government scholarships either to study abroad or to attend colleges in the Royal University of Bhutan.^v Placement is based on the BHSEC score.

All the above explanation is to say that each assessment determines that future for the student and is an opportunity for curricular structures to produce ‘students with disabilities’. There is very little modification, adaptation, or alternative to these exams. If the student does not pass them, they simply do not advance through the system. This is another major reason why there are so many out-of-age students – they have to keep repeating their class-year until they pass the exit exam. Not surprisingly, this repetition also leads to high drop-out rates (MoE 2014).

At each assessment point, the Bhutanese student is signaled in the system as either a ‘success’ or a ‘failure’. Students that may have learning difficulties are automatically disabled by this system that does not allow them to advance in the fixed curriculum; perpetually stuck reading *Momo the Monkey*. The curricular structure rewards a certain kind of ability and punishes other kinds of dis-abilities. This fits the pedagogic and cultural themes explored above in that education and knowledge are viewed as fixed and ‘won’ through hard work and strict discipline. McDermott, Edgar and Scarloss (2011) put it this way:

Everyone is born equal and is free to move up, but not everyone moves up, so those who do not move up must have something really wrong with them. In school, the same three steps deliver a similar magic: all children can learn, but many do not, so those who do not learn must have something really wrong with them. (230)

Linguistic Production The fourth and final socio-cultural structure that produces a ‘disabled student’ is that of language. Most teachers I observed struggled with English to some degree, even though English is supposed to be the medium of instruction in Bhutanese schools. Teachers gave their instructions and lessons in English, but then during work time they would bounce back and forth between Dzongkha, Nepali, and/or Tshangla, if not another of the twenty languages that are used in Bhutan (Karma Phuntsho 2013). Because one of the fundamental reasons for going to school is to learn language and literacy, the use of language is an important factor to consider.

Written language in Bhutan is a recent development. The use of Chökay, a Classical Tibetan language employing the Uchen script style, has existed in Bhutan as long as Buddhism has been present. This written form was used exclusively in the monasteries and amongst top government officials. Dzongkha – although not spoken by the majority of Bhutanese – is the official language of Bhutan, but has only been formalized as a written language since the 1980s with the formation of the Dzongkha Development Commission. While Hindi was used in the early school system, English became the official language of education in Bhutan as education grew and expanded. English serves as an imperfect *lingua franca* in Bhutan, but the absence of a strong and established first-language presents many problems in language teaching and learning.

Bhutanese historian and scholar Karma Phuntsho neatly sums up the issue of language in his book *The History of Bhutan*:

Embarrassing and ironic as it may sound, English is now used in Bhutan more than Dzongkha, the national language. Most Bhutanese languages are basic spoken languages lacking in terminologies for sophisticated ideas and spoken by only a small number of people. Even Dzongkha, the national language and the only written Bhutanese language, was until recently the only spoken vernacular and thus still in want of a fully developed grammar and orthography. The Bhutanese languages do not have sufficient vocabulary and literary resources to be able to cope with the rapid expansion of knowledge in the country ... This linguistic conundrum of multiple imperfect tongues with no solid grounding in one as the first language aptly reflects the very fragmented but dynamic personality of many young Bhutanese, who are grappling between the traditional past and postmodern future. (2013: "Many Tongues")

Without mastery in any one language, and without a significant literary history outside of the Buddhist monasteries, an educational system bent on literacy has a difficult task.

The way that language is taught in Bhutan is a challenge for students with reading difficulties. Literacy is taught through vocabulary memorization and whole-word acquisition. From what I observed, there is little emphasis on phonemic understanding, nor on word synthesis to form phrases and sentences. Sight-word memorization may work for some students, but for many they struggled with the connections between visualization, phonological sounds, and blending. The Dzongkha written language features thirty Tibetan syllabic characters, but is also an abugida in which vowel-consonant combinations and diacritics feature. This is difficult enough to learn on its own coming from an oral language tradition, let alone trying to learn advanced scientific and mathematical concepts in English at the same time.

In an educational system that is highly standardized, featuring teachers with limited pedagogical techniques, large class sizes, and with so few specialized personnel, taking the time to help a student with a reading disability using a plethora of proven practices and techniques is nearly impossible in Bhutan. This issue is multiplied when the language that the student is learning is not even their primary or secondary language. These results were also found by Alfredo Artiles et al. (2005) with English Language Learners being disproportionately viewed as having a ‘disability’ and being placed in special education. While that study was conducted in California and in a wildly different context than Bhutan, nevertheless the phenomenon of non-proficiency in mother-tongue or in English represents a potential disability construction if schools as institutions and socio-cultural structures are not organized to approach linguistic diversity. This seems to be the case in Bhutan, as a Dzongkha/English sight-word memorization approach will capture some students and disable others.

Discussion and Conclusion

The previous section was primarily focused on four socio-cultural structures within the institution of schooling that produce ‘disabled students’ in Bhutan: physical, pedagogical, curricular, and linguistic. These structures all served to signal that the value and symbolism of education in Bhutanese society was determined by some by a narrow definition of knowledge and ability, meaning that certain kinds of knowledge and certain ways of learning was presented as *prima facie*. In my interviews with both teachers and students alike, ‘good’ students were almost always described as ‘clever’ and ‘hardworking’ while ‘bad’ students were almost always described as ‘lazy’. Perhaps our human instinct is to compare ourselves and sort and categorize and this cannot be helped. But it may also be that we have built-up a socio-cultural institution in

schooling of ability and reward that is becoming more socially and culturally dangerous as its roots plant deeper into the global soil.

The monumental shifts in Bhutanese society during the 20th century certainly seem to reinforce that the stakes for receiving or not receiving a formal education have risen precipitously. For example, by far the majority of non-agricultural employment in Bhutan is in the Civil Service, of which most positions require at least a Class XII education and now mostly at least a Bachelor's degree. At the same time that the importance of schooling has taken on new social and economic meaning, the additional idea that schooling is for *everyone* has also entered the discourse. The notion of a separate building for receiving non-local and non-religious knowledge is already a radical change in Bhutan that is, in actuality, less than fifty years old. Not only this, but now it is expected that *all* children must go to this place called 'school' in the name of universal human rights.^{vi} Success attributed to the production of the 'right kind' of 'educated person' has never been higher in Bhutanese society.

Because formal secular schooling is so new to Bhutan, it is perhaps easier to observe how the institution disables students because the before and after-effects are still present within two or three generations. As McDermott and Varenne (1995) posit, without literacy there would be no illiteracy. In a Bhutanese society before written language, an attribute such as dyslexia would fail to have much meaning and would not produce valuated differences within groups. Certainly disabilities and disability stigmatization existed culturally and religiously before the addition of formal schooling ([author] 2015). However, formal secular schooling – and a modern Capitalist economy linked to such schooling – now provide an additional structural layer of producing disabled persons and identities that have additional societal consequences.

I would be remiss if I did not make the argument that my findings from Bhutan are not unique to only Bhutan itself. The reason I chose Bhutan as a research site is exactly because of its fascinating recent history of societal change, and also because of the positive ideas emanating from Bhutan in the form of Gross National Happiness (GNH) as a developmental philosophy based on societal well-being rather than economic wealth. The aspirational goals of infusing GNH with education has produced beautifully worded policy language, such as the following:

We want to see school graduates who are genuine human beings; realizing their full and true potential; caring for other; ecologically literate; contemplative as well as analytical in their understanding of the world; free of greed and without excessive desires, knowing, understanding, and appreciating completely that they are not separate from the natural world and from; in sum manifesting their humanity fully. (MoE 2012b: x)

There is great policy potential in Bhutan to avoid the disabling structures of schooling as an institution that is present in so many countries around the world. There are also many people involved in Bhutanese education that work tirelessly to dismantle or lessen the socio-cultural structures that disable. Perhaps the greatest advocates for inclusivity are the children themselves. I will close with an observation made at Thimphu Public School during recess:

Today, the children with ‘severe disabilities’ from the self-contained classroom are joining all of Class IV for recess time. The boys play a large group ball-throwing game, some girls play ball in smaller groups; others play a game that resembles “London Bridge is Falling Down.” The students with disabilities blend in seamlessly with the ‘regular’ students and it takes me a minute to locate them. Dorji, a student labelled with ‘severe autism’, throws the ball while a pack of boys chase after, tackling each other in quest of the prize. There are no rules to this game, at least from my observational viewpoint. The

boy that wins the ball returns it to Dorji and Dorji winds up to throw the ball again and the mad scramble begins anew. No adult is supervising, nor is any adult facilitating Dorji's inclusion – at least not directly. Every time Dorji throws the ball, he extends his hands in the air and cheers. Meanwhile, a small group of girls has engaged with Sonam, another student labelled with 'severe autism'. The girls chose to play with Sonam, and try to get her to throw the ball, patiently instructing and prompting her and fetching the ball when Sonam flings the ball wildly askew.

When I asked the 'regular' boys in Class IV about recess, they enthusiastically stated that it "was very fun, Sir" and, without prompt from me, also stated, "we like playing with the disabled kids" (Fieldnotes, [author] 2014). Sure, the 'regular' boys casually reproduced the categorical binary of ability/disability here, but they also simultaneously produced resistance by appropriating these cultural scripts in order to simply have some fun at school.

ⁱ Terms such as 'secular' and, more commonly, 'modern' schools are common parlance in Bhutan. This is used to distinguish between the Buddhist monastic education system ('traditional') and the Early Childhood through Tertiary system ('modern') that is mostly government-led with some private provision. For more discussion on the nuances of term usage and social functionality between the two systems, see Karma Phuntsho (2000).

ⁱⁱ Rough statistics for each school at time of fieldwork: Thimphu Public School = 1200 students (50 w/disability label), 50 staff; Village Mountain School = 300 students, 21 staff; Thimphu Inclusive School = 300 students, 24 staff; Thimphu Special School = 75 students (all w/disability label), 7 staff (mostly volunteer). (MoE 2012a)

ⁱⁱⁱ While terms like 'intellectual disabilities' and 'severe disabilities' are not terms I would use, nonetheless these were used in Bhutan and probably best understood by the general audience reading this article.

^{iv} In referring to 'students with disabilities' here and throughout the article, I mean that these were students which were identified by teachers and staff as 'having a disability'. I was aware that some students had received a medical diagnosis of some sort or another, but it was not my prerogative to actively seek out such medicalized information. Instead, I was more interested in how socio-cultural structures constructed student difference and promoted certain student abilities and interests while de-valuing others. A disability label could become part of this institutional structure over time, and I have argued elsewhere ([author] 2015) that there is a general desire of Bhutanese parents and teachers to be able to label a child with a medicalized description in order for the child to receive more inclusive services (which was certainly also being promoted by visiting 'Western' doctors). This I call the paradox of inclusion: constructing labels of difference in order to better include.

^v A note about exam statistics: Very few students sit for high-stakes exams that believe they will not pass. This is one reason why the pass rates are so high. Also, a student may only sit for exams if they have attendance of over 90%. It should also be noted that, in Bhutan, a passing mark on an exam is only 40% and the students only need to pass 4 out of 6 subject tests.

^{vi} Bhutan has excelled in reaching its universal primary enrollment and gender-parity targets as prescribed by Education for All and the Millennium Development Goals (UNESCO 2015).

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