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NON-COGNITIVE SKILLS: THE EXPERIENCE OF TEACHERS AND SCHOOLS

A Summary of Research from Bhutan and England

Overview

The purpose of this research project was to explore the use of non-cognitive skills development by teachers in classrooms, and how teachers view these 'soft skills' with the expectations of the curriculum they are required to deliver. We were interested through this research in the voices of teachers as they navigate their role and in how they engage their students within and without the curriculum.

Research Info

In 2017, 10 focus groups and observations were conducted in 10 schools (5 in England, 5 in Bhutan). Schools in England were located in the West Midlands, while schools in Bhutan were located in the western districts of Thimphu, Paro, and Haa. Ethical permissions were given by the University of Birmingham, Ministry of Education Bhutan, Royal University of Bhutan, and the participants themselves.

Funder

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What are non-cognitive skills?

The term 'non-cognitive skills' essentially began as an economic and human capital argument for schools to do more to promote character and personality traits that can lead to better societal and economic outcomes¹. The term itself is not without its criticism and misunderstanding. We used the term as an imperfect categorical umbrella-term to encompass similar trends such as *grit*, *growth-mindset*, *soft skills*, *social emotional learning*, and *habits of mind*². The notion that schools should be promoting values and character in addition to academic content is certainly not a recent development, particularly in Bhutan and in England. Both countries historically feature debate and dialogue on the role of values and character in schools, and both have more recently focused more attention on these 'skills' as well.

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Findings from England

Existing Policy or Curricular Guidance

- No specific mention of 'non-cognitive skills'
- Personal, social, and emotional development indicators in various 'key stages' of the national curriculum, particularly in early years
- Spiritual, Moral, Social, and Cultural (SMSC) requirement for schools
- British Values requirement for schools³
- Organizations such as the Jubilee Centre at the University of Birmingham⁵ are influential in character and moral education curriculum

Do teachers use or understand the term 'non-cognitive skills'?

- **No.** None of the teachers interviewed used the term 'non-cognitive skills', but many were familiar with terms such as *grit*, *growth-mindset*, *social emotional learning*, and *habits of mind*

According to teachers, how are 'non-cognitive skills' taught?

- Teachers interviewed firmly believed in role-modelling and positive school culture as the most significant factors in 'teaching' non-cognitive skills, even working with parents
- Classroom observations revealed a significant presence of motivational posters of 'good character' and non-cognitive skill development through pedagogical practices

Should 'non-cognitive skills' be a separate subject, curriculum, or class?

- **No.** Teachers interviewed universally rejected the idea of a distinct 'non-cognitive skills' curriculum or subject in their daily schedule
- Teachers believed in 'non-cognitive skills' underpinning regular curriculum and also within extracurricular activities
- Teachers believed that the curriculum was already oversubscribed

Should 'non-cognitive skills' be explicitly assessed and measured?

- **No.** Teachers interviewed do not view this as appropriate
- Most schools feature some feedback on student characteristics and attributes in the form of written comments in report cards

Findings from Bhutan

Existing Policy or Curricular Guidance

- No specific mention of 'non-cognitive skills'
- Various initiatives related to 'Bhutanese values' from the Royal Government and Ministry of Education have come (and gone), such as:
 - Educating for Gross National Happiness
 - Green Schools
 - Universal Human Values, Life Skills, and other curricular schemes⁴

Do teachers use or understand the term 'non-cognitive skills'?

- **No.** None of the teachers interviewed used the term 'non-cognitive skills'
- Other terms used were '*21st century skills*' and, in one focus group, *driglam namzha* [rules for Bhutanese cultural etiquette and values]

According to teachers, how are 'non-cognitive skills' taught?

- Teachers interviewed believed that non-cognitive skills are taught in extra-curricular activities and other out-of-classroom activities
- The teacher as a role model was only mentioned once
- Classroom observations revealed strict focus on academic content and knowledge, and little on *how* to learn, but there were some reminders of positive personal characteristics

Should 'non-cognitive skills' be a separate subject, curriculum, or class?

- **Yes.** Teachers interviewed believed that a separate time in the school day and within the curriculum would ensure that 'non-cognitive skills' would be taught
- However, many teachers believed the curriculum already to be oversubscribed

Should 'non-cognitive skills' be explicitly assessed and measured?

- **Yes.** Teachers interviewed believed that this would ensure that it was taken seriously, some advocated written examinations
- However, many teachers believed that while assessment of non-cognitive skills should be formalized, it should be in the form of written commentary in report cards

Summative Implications from the Research

- Teachers in England we interviewed believe strongly that their role and professional identity involves serving as a character and value 'role model' and promoting an inclusive and positive school culture.
- Teachers in Bhutan we interviewed primarily viewed their role and professional identity as the teaching of curricular content, although there is an increased acknowledgement of the role of the teacher as having role-modelling and personal counselling/coaching qualities.
- Teachers in England we interviewed do not want to see non-cognitive skills formally assessed or made as a separate curricular element with its own time in the school schedule.
- Teachers in Bhutan we interviewed generally support a formal assessment of non-cognitive skills and separate curriculum with its own time in the school schedule, although were wary of an already over-subscribed curriculum.

Our Recommendations for Policy

- Given all of the focus groups and observations conducted, as well as a review of existing literature on non-cognitive skills, we recommend that policy makers consider the following:
 - There is a role that schools can play in promoting certain non-cognitive skills and other 'soft' life skills, but there needs to be caution and thought in determining the purpose and utility of such skills, and the appropriateness of such skills to the specific community of students.
 - Based on our data, **we do not believe that non-cognitive skills can be effectively assessed and quantified**, nor is this supported by any of the English teachers we interviewed
 - We do not believe that there is a 'universal' set of non-cognitive skills, and there will be different needs based on the culture(s) of the local schools communities. Based on our data, **we do not support the codifying of non-cognitive skills into national curriculums.**
 - It is crucial for teachers-in-training to reflect upon their roles and responsibilities in providing moral and character guidance to their students, and in better understanding their professional identity and leadership in terms of crafting positive school culture. Therefore, a **more effective teacher training** program would promote a reflection of the non-cognitive skill guidance that teachers can inculcate in their classrooms, such as a *growth-mindset* philosophy; and on how teachers can create and sustain classroom and school cultures of inclusion, happiness, and community responsibility.
 - As our data show from both England and Bhutan, the **importance of school leadership teams** is crucial to promote classroom and school cultures of non-cognitive skill development, inclusion, happiness, and community responsibility.

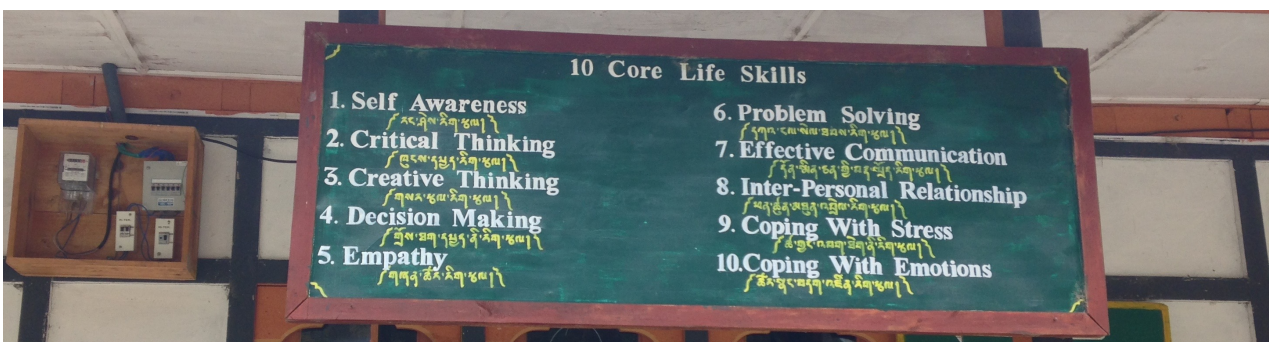


Photo: A school sign in Bhutan frequently seen on research visits to schools.

Notes

¹ Kautz, T.D., J. Heckman, R. Diris, B. ter Weel and L. Borghans. 2014. *Fostering and measuring skills: Improving cognitive and non-cognitive skills to promote lifetime success.* (NBER Working Paper #20749). Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research.

² Examples of various 'non-cognitive skills'-like discourses and popular movements:

Costa, A.L. and B. Kallick. 2009. *Learning and leading with habits of mind: 16 essential characteristics for success.*

Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Duckworth, A. 2016. *Grit: The power of passion and perseverance.* New York: Scribner.

Durlak, J.A., C.E. Domitrovich, R.P. Weissberg and T.P. Gullotta (Eds.). 2016. *Handbook of social and emotional learning: Research and practice.* New York: Guilford Press.

Dweck, C.S. 2017. *Mindset: Changing the way you think to fulfil your potential* (2nd Ed.). New York: Ballantine Books.

Ripley, A. 2014. *The smartest kids in the world: And how they got that way.* New York: Simon and Schuster.

Tough, P. 2016. *Helping children succeed: What works and why.* London: Random House.

³ Department for Education [Guidance on Promoting Fundamental British Values Through SMSC](#)

⁴ For example, see: Ministry of Education [Implementation of Life Skills Education in School Review Report, 2014](#)

⁵ <http://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk>

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Photo: Vision, Mission, and Goal statements on a school building in Bhutan; reflecting the philosophy of this school's leadership.