

Reimagining education?

Reflections on the Bhutan Bacculaureate and Nel Noddings' concepts of Happiness, Education, and Ethics of Care.

KAREN BJERG PETERSEN

ABSTRACT: In this article, based on a brief introduction to the Bhutan Bacculaureate and Nel Noddings's theories of happiness, education, and ethics of care, I will reflect on the possibilities of 'reimagining' education based on these two approaches. In conclusion, I will briefly discuss limitations and issues in the practical implementation of the two approaches to education.

KEYWORDS: Happiness and Education; Ethics of Care; Bhutan Bacculaureate; Value-based education

In the wake of a worldwide neoliberal education policy, there has for many years been a focus on testing, subject teaching, skills, competences, and documentation, often labeled 'skills- and competency-based education' (see e.g., Kelchen 2015; Petersen 2022). This was partly a result of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) playing an increasingly important role in inventing large-scale transnational assessments and partly because nation-states have endeavored to include education as part of the development of the so-called 'competitive state' (see e.g., OECD 2012; Pedersen 2011).

As a result, teachers have strived to implement curriculum, goals, and subgoals for each school subject, and students have been presented with many tests to check their knowledge. This is a tendency that many educational researchers have warned against from the beginning of the implementation of a neoliberal education policy in the USA and Great Britain, by e.g., emphasizing that such focus would not only narrow the understanding of the goals and aims of education but also lead to a so-called 'teaching-to-the-test-regime', where teachers and students lose sight of value and content in education (Apple 2006; Ball 2006; Berliner 2009; Biesta 2010). Instead, many of these researchers emphasized that education should rather be 'value-based' and focus on ethics, relationship, values, and the whole individual (see e.g., Biesta 2010; Carr 2011)¹.

¹For a more in-depth introduction to skills and value-based education, I refer to my article in a previous issue of *Fecun* (Petersen 2022).

In the 2020s however, there are signs in both Denmark and Bhutan that the predominant ‘skills and competency-based’ understanding of education is about to be reversed and be replaced by a more ‘value-based’ education, which focuses on broader aspects of the goal of education and students’ development in more holistic ways (see e.g., Knudsen et al. 2024; Oxenbøll 2019; Tobden & Ham 2022).

In Denmark, a new teacher education act was adopted in March 2023, which began to be implemented from the autumn semester 2023 (BEK.nr. 374 2023). The new teacher education focuses on the so-called concept of ‘dannelse’ - often related to the German term ‘Bildung’² - and on a holistic approach towards teaching, teacher training and teacher education students (BEK nr. 374 2023). The goal of the new teacher education is therefore not only seen as students acquiring skills and competences within their subjects, but also taking care of the students’ personal and holistic development. The aim of the teacher education according to the new act is thus to “strengthen the students’ academic, professional and *personal* development” (§1, 2) (my emphasis).

Furthermore, in October 2023 the Danish government has presented a new plan for primary and lower secondary education, the Danish ‘folkeskole,’ entitled “Prepared for the future II. Freedom and immersion - a quality program for the primary [and lower secondary] school”³ (Regeringen, 2023). The government wants to simplify the many requirements regarding goals, sub-goals, and skills within each subject and to set free the individual teacher and primary school to focusing on the students and their holistic development rather than documentation. A symbolic sign of this focus can be seen in the preface to the government document, where one of the first paragraphs in the act of the primary and lower secondary school is quoted:

Folkeskolen must develop working methods and creating frameworks for experience, immersion, and enthusiasm, so that students develop awareness and imagination and gain confidence in their own possibilities and background to take a stand and act (Regeringen 2023, p.2).

In the past years in Bhutan there has been a similar focus from the side of the government and the King to emphasize a so-called ‘whole person’ perspective in primary, lower and upper secondary education (see e.g., Tobden & Ham 2022). Tobden & Ham, referring to the King and The Royal Kasho on Education Reform (2021) write,

The new vision for education must blend 21st century competencies with holistic development so that Bhutanese children are educated and equipped to become caring, dependable, and honest human beings (p. 118).

As one of the results of this emphasis on a holistic education, the so-called Bhutan Baccalaureate was adopted in 2021 and piloted in various schools in Bhutan (see e.g., <https://dgi.edu.bt/bhutan-baccalaureate/>).

² It must be emphasized that I do not equate the term “Bildung”, which has a long history in the Danish and Scandinavian education system (see e.g. Petersen et al. 2021), with ethics of care or the Bhutan Baccalaureate. I am only pointing out that there seems to be a coincidence in both Denmark, Bhutan and in Nel Noddings’s philosophy to focus on a more holistic approach towards students and education.

³ My translation. The Danish term ‘folkeskole’ covers primary and lower secondary schools.

Thoughts about value-based education with a focus on holistic education, ethics and relationships are however not new (Knudsen et al. 2024). At the end of the last and beginning of this century, the American female researcher Nel Noddings (1984, 2003, 2013) discussed the purpose of education and developed her theory of "ethics of care" as a universal foundation for education. Noddings furthermore put a specific emphasis on "happiness and education" (Noddings, 2003), a concept that is also included in the Bhutan understanding of "Gross National Happiness" and schooling (see e.g., Long 2021). In Denmark, the philosopher Løgstrup (1905-1981) had similar thoughts in the 1950s and is famous for his concept about 'the ethical demand' (Løgstrup, 2020). According to Løgstrup, there is an ethical demand to take care of other persons. A famous quote by Løgstrup is that humans always have 'the other human being's life in one's hands' (Løgstrup 1997, p. 25). Also concepts such as empathy, presence, relationship and mindfulness as relevant to education and school development have been prevalent both in Denmark and Bhutan, where in particular the concept of happiness has had a widespread influence (see e.g. Long 2021; Tobden & Ham 2022; Utha et al 2016).

In this article, based on a short introduction to the Bhutan Baccalaureate and Nel Noddings' theories on happiness and education and ethics of care, I will reflect on possibilities to 'reimagining' education based on these two approaches. In conclusion, I will briefly discuss limitations and issues in the practical implementation of the two approaches to education.

The principles of the Bhutan Baccalaureate and Gross National Happiness

In 2021, at the Bhutanese Ministry of Education website, an "Education Road map for the 21st century" was announced, and it was furthermore stated that "the ministry also started the implementation of the Bhutan Baccalaureate." (<http://www.bbs.bt/news/?p=151182>). The Bhutan Baccalaureate,

sees education as a holistic process that extends far beyond the mere acquisition of knowledge. It is a model of education that takes into account a more rounded and wholesome understanding of the learning process (<https://dgi.edu.bt/bhutan-baccalaureate/>)

It centers on five areas of development of the learner, e.g., cerebral, physical, social, emotional, and spiritual. According to the Bhutan Baccalaureate, the five areas of development is thus a **holistic** approach to learning that "strives to break down silos in schooling", to ensure the development of a learner in all five areas, and "to develop constructive, contributory citizens of a just and harmonious society" (<https://dgi.edu.bt/bhutan-baccalaureate/>). In many ways thus, the Bhutan Baccalaureate seems to be an extension of the now well-known "Gross National Happiness" (GNH) model, invented in Bhutan in 1972, introduced by the king as "the touchstone of all governmental efforts, both domestic and foreign" (Long 2021: 75). Long (2021) – investigating the "Modern Bhutan's Buddhist Statecraft" explained GNH as,

Bhutan's unique multidimensional approach to development that seeks to maintain a harmonious balance among material well-being and the spiritual, emotional, and cultural needs of society (p. 75).

The GNH model is thus a value-based approach to a development of society and people, in which care and caring for others – be it people, things, nature, culture – is crucial. Long quotes a sentence from a GNH Center publication from 2014 as follows,

We know that true abiding happiness cannot exist while others suffer, and comes only from serving others, living in harmony with nature, and realizing our innate wisdom and the true and brilliant nature of our own minds (Long 2021, p. 76).

While the Bhutan Baccalaureate and Gross National Happiness model is connected to Bhutanese approaches to life and education, similar concepts in the opposite corner of the world have been suggested by the American philosopher, Nel Noddings.

Some core concepts in Nel Noddings' theory of 'Happiness and Education' and 'Ethics of Care'

Nel Noddings (1984, 2003, 2013) is probably the most outstanding researcher who has focused on the ethics of care in life and education while at the same time similar to the before-mentioned American and British educational researchers criticizing the skills- and competency-based education focus in the American schools. Noddings emphasized that "discussion of aims, in contrast to that of objectives and goals, centers on the deepest questions in education" (Noddings 2003, p. 75). In addition, in her book from 2003, Noddings focused on the concepts of "Happiness and Education", highlighting that happiness and education should be closely related. She questioned the current education policy by asking "why we are promoting certain goals in schooling and why [do] we continue to neglect education for personal life and for happiness in our occupations" (p. 93). Noddings thus criticizes the emphasis on economic issues and suggests that education for personal and public life should be at the core of and the aim of happiness in/and education (Noddings, 2003).

In her theory of ethics of care, which is a further development and concretization of her thoughts on education (and happiness), Noddings emphasizes that the "primary aim of every educational institution and of every educational effort" is the maintenance and enhancement of caring, which she perceives of as the root of establishing happiness in both personal and public life (Noddings 2013, p. 172). According to Noddings, in education and personal life, the particularity of relationships is fundamental, namely the relation between a caring person – described as the "one-caring" (eg. Noddings 2013, p. 50 ff) and the person being "cared-for" (p. 59 ff). Noddings describes a caring person as one who regularly establishes caring relations and, maintains them over time and as one who "remains responsible here and now for this cared-for and this situation" (p.43). Happiness in education and teaching is thus closely related to the concept of caring. Noddings describes this in the following quote:

As we have wrestled with problems of ethicality, however, we have been led to identify something more basic - **something from which both happiness and perfection spring**, toward which they tend. For the one-caring, this "something" is the special relatedness of caring. To receive and to be received, to care and be cared-for: these are the basic realities of human being and its basic aims (Noddings 2013, p. 172).

The relationship between the one-caring and the cared-for forms the core element of her relational ethics, and especially in education, “ethical caring requires an effort” (p.80). According to Noddings this quite naturally becomes “the first aim of parenting and of education” (Noddings 2013: 172).

The concept of ethics of care in education however implies a mutual connection between the ‘one-caring’ (teacher) and the ‘cared-for’ (student) and a degree of reciprocity, which means that both parts gain and give in the relationship in different ways. According to Noddings (2013), the relationship between the caregiver and the cared-for is thus crucial in education.

With respect to the aim of education, Noddings (2013) contradicts while not denying the common assumption (especially emphasized in new public management-based education policy), that achievement of certain skills and “trained intelligence” is the highest goal of education. In contrast, although “rationality” and intelligence are “important and prized”, Noddings outlines that the “primary aim of every educational institution and of every educational effort must be *the maintenance and enhancement of caring*” (p. 172, my emphasis). According to Noddings caring “establishes the climate, a first approximation to the range of acceptable practices, and a lens through which all practices and possible practices are examined” (p. 172-173).

Reimagining education? Reflections on the Bhutan Baccalaureate and the theory of ‘Happiness and Education’ and ‘Ethics of Care’

When we compare the Bhutan Baccalaureate and Nel Noddings's concepts of happiness, education, and care, it is important to be aware of the very different contexts for the two approaches. The social, cultural, educational, and political conditions differ quite obviously.

Bhutan is a small, mountainous Himalayan country of about 700,000 inhabitants, which on the one hand has a very long Buddhist monastic and a relatively short secular education tradition of about 50–60 years. However, the country has invested heavily in expanding the education system at all levels, from pre-school to higher education, and in the process has been inspired by global education trends from among others Western countries including the USA, Australia, Canada, and the OECD (Long 2021; Sapam, Singh & Ratna 2019; Tobden & Ham 2022; Utha et al 2016).

The United States, on the other hand, is one of the largest and most influential countries in the so-called Western world, both in terms of political, cultural, and economic conditions with a long history of education (Urban, Wagoner & Gaither 2019). For the same reasons, trends and theories in the education sector have not only influenced local conditions but also had a great impact on international educational trends, where Denmark and Bhutan are no exceptions. The previously mentioned ‘skills- and competence-based education’, also promoted by the OECD, is an example of this (Carr 2011; Kelchen 2015; OECD 2012).

Not only the American, but also the European criticism of this approach in education therefore has a kind of ripple effect in local education systems, including both the previously mentioned recent Danish changes and understandings of the aim of education (Ball 2006; BEK nr. 374 2023; Biesta 2010) and the Bhutan Baccalaureate.

In addition to David Berliner (2009), Michael Apple (2006), and many others, Nel Noddings (2003), as previously mentioned, was also aware of the pitfalls in the American education policy at the time, focusing primarily on the achievement on goals, but neglecting a core aim, namely education for “personal life and for happiness in our occupations” (p.93). According to Noddings hence the education system overlooked a core aim of education, namely that of the development of the student as a whole person, emphasizing that personal development, happiness and care would be means to realizing happiness in personal and public life.

In many ways, the problems highlighted by Noddings in her books from 2003 and 2013 are precisely what the Bhutanese government has been trying to address, not only with the newly invented Bhutan Baccalaureate from 2021, but also in the overall understanding of the aim of Bhutanese education by emphasizing the maintenance of “a harmonious balance among material well-being and the spiritual, emotional, and cultural needs of society” (Long 2021, p. 72) as core values.

Noddings criticized the exclusive focus of American education policy on material wealth, repeatedly emphasizing that more profound values were thereby overlooked. The above description of the Bhutanese government's understanding of the purpose of education is precisely an underlining that not only material, but especially also human, spiritual, social, and cultural values are significant in education. A position that Noddings (2003, 2013) repeatedly highlighted.

Noddings's thoughts on the close connection between happiness and education, and her repeated emphasis on the aim of education as having happiness in the individual's personal and public life as the core focus, can be found throughout the development of the modern state of Bhutan, where gross national happiness (GNP) rather than gross domestic product (GDP) has been highlighted as a goal (see e.g., Long 2021).

From a values-based perspective, the newly invented Bhutan Baccalaureate lies in the slipstream of both the understanding of Bhutan's emphasis on happiness and GNP and, by extension, Nel Noddings's emphasis on core values in education. The five areas of development in the Baccalaureate, e.g., cerebral, physical, social, emotional, and spiritual development are in many ways comparable to some of Noddings' core ideas about education. Based on the contextual background for Noddings' theories in a society that focuses primarily on skills, Noddings (2013, p. 172), as mentioned, in no way denied that achievement of skills and “trained intelligence” is one of the goals of education. Compared to the five areas in the Bhutanese Baccalaureate, the understanding of trained intelligence can be seen as equivalent to focusing on cerebral development.

Noddings, however, as noted above, also emphasizes a range of other development areas for modern education, among others, personal growth, happiness in private and public life, and caring. In many ways Noddings' focus can be aligned with the social, emotional, and spiritual development areas in the Bhutanese Baccaleareaute. The explicit holistic approach and the aim of the Baccalaureate “to develop constructive, contributory citizens of a just and harmonious society” in many ways mirror Noddings' understanding of the aim of education to develop happiness in individual and public life (<https://dgi.edu.bt/bhutan-baccalaureate/>).

Although Noddings's concepts thus appear to be comparable to the Bhutanese approach, there are also differences. Where Noddings particularly emphasizes that education should

promote personal development and the individuals' happiness in their private and public life, and thus can be seen as individualistic, the Bhutanese understanding, in contrast, can to a greater extent be perceived as a more 'collectivistic' approach, which i.e. can be seen in the quote above where it is emphasized that the new education should develop contributory citizens of a "just and harmonious society".

The Bhutanese Baccalaureate also focuses on the students' physical development, an area that Noddings does not consider very important.

Finally, Noddings places great emphasis on the ethics of care and on the relationship between the so-called one-carer, e.g., the teacher, and the cared-for, e.g., the student. This distinction and sometimes difficulties in such relationships, e.g., what Noddings refers to as "ethical caring requires an effort" (Noddings 2013, p.80), are not addressed in the description of the Bhutanese Baccalaureate. In my discussion about possible limitations and obstacles in implementing educational ideas into practice, I will return to this question.

In conclusion. Obstacles and limitations in implementing educational ideas into practice.

When we look at the two approaches to education described in the previous sections, there seem to be several similarities but also a few differences, as mentioned.

At the outset, it must be emphasized that when it comes to the question of the actual relationship between ideals, e.g., the Bhutan Baccalaureate or Nel Noddings's ethics of care and the day-to-day work in schools, it is obvious that this will require more in-depth investigations.

In addition, it can be discussed what happens when ideal concepts and theories about education as the two approaches described in this article are going to be put into practice at a time when schools and teachers worldwide are faced with large workloads and a range of other problems that also need to be solved (Thompson 2021). In a 2021 report about the global status of teachers and the teaching profession, it is noted that the "overall workload" and the "increase in administrative tasks associated with policies" have the "most negative responses" in a global survey (Thompson 2021, p. 77).

Sapam, Singh & Ratna (2019) in a similar way regarding the implementation of new initiatives because of changes in education policy in Bhutan, emphasize that this may lead to an increase in teachers' workload and a decrease in the enrollment of students to teacher education. The authors write that

unfavourable working conditions due to heavy workload especially in the phase of implementation process of changes in education policy and lack of learning resources in remote locations is leading to reduction in graduates opting for teaching jobs (p. 57).

In addition, some scholars have disputed Noddings' claim to establish a mutual connection and relationship in education based on the ethics of care. Flinders (2001:211) has pointed out that in "unequal relationships (such as student-teacher) things can become complex." Flinders (p.211) points to complexities in Noddings' approach and emphasizes that "issues of time, intensity and situational variations also have to be worked out" when the ethics of care is applied to different educational settings.

But as mentioned in the previous section, Noddings highlights how ethical caring is also strenuous and demanding and requires effort". In Noddings's defense, one could argue that precisely this part of Noddings's point of view has been overlooked both by critics and in the

Bhutanese approaches (let alone others) to education. Moreover, the work and efforts to be made by the teachers are often not even mentioned.

Looking at the above Bhutanese Baccalaureate and GNH model that emphasizes that “happiness cannot exist while others suffer and comes only from serving others” (Long 2021:76) and Noddings’ emphasis on “the special relatedness of caring” from which “both happiness and perfection springs”, the common focus on happiness, ethics of care, and the formation of the whole person as the aim of education nevertheless in many ways seem to resonate not only with each other but equally with recent approaches in the Danish school system. Such approaches seem to strive to consider a more rounded and holistic understanding of the aim of education. Further research can shed light on the implementation of such pedagogical thinking in practice.

Literature

- Apple, M. W. (2006). *Educating the "right" way: Markets, standards, God, and inequality*. New York: Routledge.
- Ball, S. J. (2006). *Education policy and social class: The selected works of Stephen J. Ball*. London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203015179>
- BEK nr. 374 (2023). Bekendtgørelse om uddannelsen til professionsbachelor som lærer i folkeskolen. Retrieved from <https://www.retsinformation.dk/eli/lta/2023/374>
- Berliner, D. C. (2009). The incompatibility of high-stakes testing and the development of skills for the 21st century. In R. Marzano (Ed.), *On excellence in teaching*. Bloomington: Solution Tree Press.
- Biesta, G. J. J. (2010). Why 'what works' still won't work: From evidence-based education to value-based education. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 29, 491-503. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11217-010-9191-x>
- Carr, D. (2011). Values, virtues and professional development in education and teaching. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 50 (3), 171-176 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2011.07.004>.
- Flinders, D. J. (2001) 'Nel Noddings 1929-' in Joy A. Palmer (ed.) *Fifty Modern Thinkers on Education. From Piaget to the present*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203464694-38>
- Kelchen, R. (2015). *The Landscape of Competency-Based Education. Enrollments, Demography and Affordability*. AEI Series on Competency-Based Higher Education. New York: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research.
- Knudsen, L.E.D, Wiberg, M., Petersen, K. B. & L. Haastrup (eds.) (2024). *Teacher Ethics and Teaching Quality in Scandinavian Schools: New Reflections, Future Challenges, and Global Impacts*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003407775>
- Long, W.J. (2021). *Modern Bhutan's Buddhist Statecraft*. In: Long, W.I. *A Buddhist Approach to International Relations*, Palgrave Macmillan, 71-86.

- https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-68042-8_5
- Løgstrup, K.E. (2020). *The ethical demand*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198855989.001.0001>
- Noddings, N. (1984). *Caring: a feminine approach to ethics and moral education*. University of California Press.
- Noddings, N. (2003). *Happiness and education*. Cambridge University Press
<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511499920>
- Noddings, N. (2013). *Caring a relational approach to ethics & moral education*. University of California Press (2nd ed).
- OECD (2012). *The Policy Impact of Pisa: An Exploration of the Normative Effects of International Benchmarking in School System Performance*. OECD Education Working Paper, 7. Retrieved from [https://www.oecd.org/officialdocuments/publicdisplaydocumentpdf/?cote=EDU/WKP\(2012\)8&docLanguage=En](https://www.oecd.org/officialdocuments/publicdisplaydocumentpdf/?cote=EDU/WKP(2012)8&docLanguage=En)
- Oxenbøll, E. (2019, December 12). 2020'erne kommer: Folkeskolen får færre tests og mere kvalitet. *Kommunen.dk*. Retrieved from <https://www.kommunen.dk/artikel/2020-erne-kommer-noget-om-folkeskolen>
- Pedersen, O. K. (2011). *Konkurrencestaten*. Copenhagen: Hans Reitzel.
- Petersen, K. B., Von Brömsen, K., Hellesdatter, G., Garsdal, J., Paulsen, M. & Kofoed, O. (eds) (2021). *Rethinking Education in the Light of Global Challenges: Scandinavian Perspectives on Culture, Society and the Anthropocene*. Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003217213>
- Petersen, K. B. (2022). Global Citizenship Education for (unknown) futures of education: reflections on skills-and competency-based versus virtue-based education. *Journal of Futures of Education, Culture and Nature. Learning to Become. FECUN*, 1, 89-101.
<https://doi.org/10.7146/fecun.v1i.130238>
- Regeringen (2023). *Forberedt på fremtiden II. Frihed og fordybelse - et kvalitetsprogram for folkeskolen/ Prepared for the future II. Freedom and immersion - a quality program for the primary [and lower secondary] school*. Retrieved from <https://www.uvm.dk/-/media/filer/uvm/aktuelt/pdf23/okt/231011-forberedt-pa%CC%8A-fremtiden-2-web.pdf>
- Sapam, R., Singh, E.H. & Ratna, R. (2019). Education in Bhutan: An Observation from Sustainability Perspective. *Journal of Critical Reviews*, 6 (3), 55-59.
- The Royal Kasho on Education Reform (2021). *Education reform*. Thimphu, Bhutan. Kuensel.
<https://kuenselonline.com/royal-kashos-on-civil-service-and-education/>
- Tobden, J. & Ham, M. (2022). Gross national happiness and challenges for education in Bhutan: Perspectives of policy experts. *The International Education Journal: Comparative Perspectives*, 21 (2).
- Tompson, G. (2021). *The Global Report on the Status of Teachers 2021*. Education International Research. Retrieved https://issuu.com/educationinternational/docs/2021_ei_research_statusofteachers_eng_final
- Urban, W.J., Wagoner, J.L. & Gaither, M. (eds.) (2019). *American Education. A History*. 6th edition. New York: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429426179>

Utha, K., Giri, K., Gurung, B., Giri, N., Kjær-Rasmussen, L. K., Keller, H. D., Willert, S., & Keller, K. D. (2016). *Quality of School Education in Bhutan: Case Studies in the Perspective of Gross National Happiness and Assessment Practices*. Aalborg: Aalborg Universitetsforlag.

Websites:

<http://www.bbs.bt/news/?p=151182>

<https://dgi.edu.bt/bhutan-baccalaureate/>