Constructing disability in Bhutan: Schools, structures, policies, and global discourses

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Abstract

Bhutan is a small country in the Himalaya that has experienced rapid societal changes in the past 60 years. Perhaps the most significant change in Bhutan has occurred in its educational system, which grew from a very limited presence in 1961 to now serving the entire youth population of Bhutan. With this massive increase in educational service provision, the challenges of providing education for a heterogeneous student population are now front and center in Bhutanese policy and discourse. Specifically, one of the major challenges in Bhutanese education today is how to include students with disabilities in schooling. Inclusive education policy, philosophy, and practice has existed in international discourse for many years—especially in United Nations human rights initiatives such as the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. This dissertation, using a vertical case study approach, explores the interactions of multiple levels of policy-making as the inclusive education discourse makes it way through Bhutan. At the top levels, two discursive streams are entering Bhutan— that of the medical approach to constructing disability and that of the rights-based approach to constructing disability. These distinct yet interconnected streams present a contradictory international message from which Bhutanese policy actors must try to make meaning. Several theories pertaining to the process of educational policy transfer are used to explain this policy borrowing process—world culture, world-systems, and a more anthropological approach— as it applies to the case of Bhutan. The study then shifts to the school level where the country's rich historical context has produced local socio-cultural constructions of disability that serve to 'disable' and exclude certain students. These multiple levels of analysis show how local understandings and practices of disability influence Bhutanese interpretations and implementation of inclusive education policy borrowed from elsewhere and add new insights into the study of policy in comparative education.