

Incompatible with Happiness: Results from Second Survey of Bullying and Discrimination Experiences of Bhutanese Higher Education Students

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Abstract

Bhutan is known to the outside world as a nation with Gross National Happiness (GNH) as its goal, a concept which is fundamentally underpinned by Buddhist philosophy of loving-kindness, compassion, emphatic joy, and equanimity. In Buddhism these are referred to as the four immeasurable qualities that one must cultivate to become kind, compassionate, and caring towards all living beings, and ultimately generates happiness. This concept as applied should lead to minimal or no instances of bullying and discrimination in such a society and in particular in educational institutions. However, prior studies as well as media reports have shown that there are growing instances of bullying and discrimination amongst both school and higher education students, and staff which is a cause of concern for a GNH nation. Such school experiences are likely to be transferred to higher education institutions and then later to the work places. Bullying and discrimination are often associated with negative outcomes and impacts overall mental well-being of students which can be detrimental to their later life. Therefore, this quantitative study was designed to understand the current level of bullying and discrimination amongst students (N= <10,000) of higher education institutions (n= 15) in Bhutan through a self-administered on-line survey to a representative sample of 1652 (male= 41.3%; female= 57.7% & others= 1%). Essentially, the reported prevalence of being bullied reduced (from about 45% in 2016 to about 36% in 2023), and likewise the reported prevalence of bullying others declined (from 18% to about 10%). There was also a slight reduction for those reporting some form of discrimination; from 51% from 46%. The preliminary findings from the study will provide insights into the current state of bullying and discrimination prevalent in the higher education institutions and make a case for more effective interventions to reduce prevalence of bullying and discrimination in schools and colleges, and, more broadly, the community.

Keywords: GNH, bullying, discrimination, caring, higher education student, compassion, joy

Introduction

As in most countries, bullying and discrimination by peers and/or teachers is common in Bhutanese schools and colleges (including monastic schools and colleges), despite the country's adherence to a guiding philosophy of Gross National Happiness (GNH) (Choden et al., 2019; Sherab et al, 2019; Sherab & Schuelka; 2023). Bullying and discrimination arise in a complex mix of individual, family, school, cultural and religious factors, as well as gender, poverty, marginalisation, and (dis)ability. Bullying can be physical, verbal, emotional and sexual in nature, and involve spreading rumours, exclusion from activities and services, and be direct or via social media and other internet platforms (Duncan, 2010; Swearer & Hyme, 2015; UNICEF, 2022). In the Bhutanese context, prior studies have shown that both school and college students were

often rebuked, reprimanded, and criticised in the classrooms during teaching-learning processes (Sherab, 2013; Sherab & Schuelka, 2023).

Previous studies demonstrate that bullying and discrimination have significant negative impacts on the mental health, well-being and psychosocial development of children and young people. These can include depression, anxiety, stress, insecurity, feelings of rejection, isolation, loneliness, suicidal ideation, suicidal attempts, sleep difficulties, substance use, poor nutrition and self-care. Likewise, other impacts such as lack of concentration, low performance, truancy, and fear of attending school, are evident (Annalakshmi & Venkatesan, 2018; Baldasare et al., 2012; Choden et al., 2019; Hanani, 2021; Holt et al., 2014; Li et al., 2023; Lubis et al., 2022; Man et al., 2022; Mishna, et al., 2010; Sherab et al., 2019; Williams et al., 2019).

It has been estimated that between 15 to 35% of people may experience bullying in their lifetime, with up to 30% reporting being involved in bullying others; additionally, the rate of cyberbullying is higher (Craig et al., 2009; Fekkes et al., 2005; WHO-SEARO, 2016). Those from minority groups and/or with diverse sexual and gender orientations experience higher rates of bullying (Gower et al, 2018; Hinduja & Patchin, 2020; Miller & Endo, 2012).

Bhutan Situation

The WHO-SEARO (2017) Global School-based Student Health of students across Bhutan, found that 27% of the young people surveyed reported that they had been bullied at school on one or more days during the 30 days prior to the survey. The National Commission for Women and Children and UNICEF Bhutan (2016) revealed that about half the sample aged 13-17 and 18-24 experienced emotional violence and about 44% physical violence at school, school was not a safe place, and that children reported that they were beaten sometimes 'for no reason', or when the teachers were 'stressed or drunk'.

The first survey of bullying and discrimination among college students in Bhutan in 2016 found that 36% of the Bhutanese college students surveyed had experienced bullying at some point in their lives (Choden et al., 2019). It was found that the males in the sample were more likely to be victims of verbal bullying as well as perpetrators of physical and verbal bullying. The college students who are in teacher preparation courses were more likely to be victims of all types of bullying, and verbally bullied others.

The current study was undertaken to ascertain the current situation seven years after the initial study of college students in Bhutan in 2016 (Choden et al., 2019; Sherab et al., 2019), and make further recommendations that might be required to inform curricula and interventions to reduce bullying and discrimination in school and college settings.

Research Questions

This study aimed at addressing the following research questions:

- i. What is the prevalence of the experience of being bullied and bullying others among the higher education students?
- ii. What is the prevalence of discrimination among the higher education students?
- iii. Are there any significant differences in being bullied and bullying others, in terms of gender, year of study, and type of accommodation?

- iv. Are there any significant differences in students' experiences of discrimination in terms of gender, year of study, and type of accommodation?

Materials and Methods

This study employed a self-administered on-line structured survey to a representative sample of undergraduate students from 15 higher education institutions (one refused to participate) across Bhutan. These institutions are discipline specific and of varying sizes. While some have up to 1500 students, a few are small with only about 100 students. The survey contained the items in the first study (Choden et al., 2019; Sherab et al., 2019) with some additions. In relation to demographic information, family circumstances, student accommodation and supports - as these could influence the experience and impacts of bullying, for example living alone or in a hostel - family supports and education of parents were included. The survey also included items regarding: substance use, reasons for substance use, perceptions of the safety of various substances, sexual orientation, sexual behaviour (with "sexual intercourse," defined as vaginal or anal sex), bullying (9 for victim and 7 for bullying others from Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire, Solberg & Olweus, 2003) and discrimination (8 item Everyday Discrimination Scale designed by Williams et al., 1997), and mental health using the Kessler 6 (Kessler et al., 2010). Additional items were included to expand the mental health and well-being section, namely optimism, resilience using the six item Brief Resilience Scale (Smith et al., 2009), and plans to remain in or leave Bhutan. However, this paper reports only the bullying and discrimination prevalence among higher education students studying in the 15 Bhutanese higher education institutions.

After ethical approval was granted by the Centre for Educational Research and Development, Paro College of Education, Royal University of Bhutan, where this project was based, the focal persons of all the university campuses in Bhutan were approached to facilitate this on-line survey and encourage participation.

Data Analyses

Data were mainly analysed using descriptive statistics (SPSS v23) to find out the prevalence rate (in terms of percentages for each item) and to understand the overall student perceptions of bullying and discrimination among college students. Having found some evidence of bullying and discrimination among the college students, further exploration was carried out based on the bullying scale (three components) and discrimination scale (one component) validated during the prior survey in 2016 through principal component analyses (PCA). The "victim of bullying" scale had three components, the "bullying others" scale produced two components, and the discrimination scale had only one component. Three one-way multivariate analysis of variances (MANOVAs) were conducted between the six components: (i) *victim of verbal bullying*; (ii) *victim of bullying through influencing others*; (iii) *victim of physical bullying*; (iv) *bullying others verbally*; (v) *bullying others physically*; and (vi) *everyday discrimination* as dependent variables (DVs) and three demographic variables (*gender, year of study, and student accommodation*) as independent variables (IVs) to explore if there were any statistically significant differences in their experiences.

A few open-ended responses related to bullying and discrimination were included in the relevant sections. The overall findings of the current survey on bullying were compared with those of the 2016 survey results. The report on discrimination will

be the first ever in the Bhutanese context.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was provided from the Centre for Educational Research and Development. As indicated in the survey form, students responding to the on-line survey were considered as having consented to participate. Participants were permitted to withdraw from the study at any time. Confidentiality of the information collected was guaranteed as no name was required to be provided. A range of contact numbers and details were provided at the conclusion of the survey to link any student experiencing any level of distress to services available to provide information and assistance, such as counsellors, mental health, sexual and reproductive health, and youth-friendly resources/services.

Results

The results of this study are presented as they relate to the research questions posed above, preceded by demographic information.

Demographic Characteristics

Relevant demographic information is presented in Table 1. Essentially, 57% of participants were male, 42% female and 1% others. Representation from the colleges of Bhutan was uneven. Most lived in hostels, and fathers tended to work as farmers or in government service, while mothers worked as farmers or managed home duties.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics (2016 n = 2471) (2023 n=1652)

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	682	41.3
	Female	954	57.7
	Neither male nor female	4	0.2
	Both male and female	3	0.2
	Unsure/undecided	9	0.5
Year of study	1 st	665	40.3
	2 nd	599	36.1
	3 rd	214	13.0
	4 th	168	10.2
	5 th	5	0.3
College accommodation	College hostel	1424	86.2
	Living with parents/guardian	84	5.1
	Living with friends	82	5.0
	Living alone	62	3.8
Father's occupation	Government service	474	28.7
	Private/own business	265	16.1
	Corporate	42	2.5
	Farmer	659	39.9
	Not working	97	5.9

	Not applicable (no father)	115	7.0
Mother's occupation	Government service	113	6.8
	Private/own business	160	8.1
	Corporate	17	1.0
	Farmer	665	40.3
	Not working	255	15.4
	Home duties	373	22.6
	Not applicable (no mother)	68	4.1

Prevalence of Bullying

About 36% of students surveyed reported experiencing at least one form of bullying (Table 2), with the most frequent being having lies told about them (36.7%), being left out or ignored (34.6%), and others made to dislike them (31.7%). However, far fewer reported bullying others (10.1%), the most frequent being by excluding others.

Table 2

Prevalence of Bullying (2016 n = 2471) (2023 n=1652)

Item no.	Being victimized	2016 (%)	2023 (%)
1	Hit, kicked or pushed	14.0	13.9
2	Locked indoors	14.0	6.6
3	Money/things taken/destroyed	11.9	8.8
4	Lies told about	45.2	36.7
5	Others made to dislike me	36.1	31.7
6	Left out, excluded, ignored	35.1	34.6
7	Threatened to do things did not want to	13.5	11.2
8	Bullied with names with sexual meanings	8.1	11.1
9	Bullied with names about race/colour	12.8	12.7
Item no.	Bullying others		
1	Stole money/destroyed things	4.5	4.3
2	Hit, kicked, pushed other students	8.7	5.2
3	Locked others indoors	3.2	2.9
4	Left others out, excluded, ignored	18.1	10.1
5	Threatened/forced others to do things they did not want to	9.1	3.3
6	Bullied others with names about race/colour	9.1	4.9
7	Called other names, made fun of, teased them	16.2	7.9

Prevalence of Discrimination

About 46% of participants reported being discriminated against (see Table 3), with perceiving people acting as if they were better than them (46.1%) and not thinking they were smart (41.7%).

Table 3*Prevalence of Discrimination (2016 n = 2471) (2023 n=1652)*

Item no.	Everyday discrimination	2016 (%)	2023 (%)
1	You are treated with less courtesy than other people are	30.7	30.8
2	You are treated with less respect than other people are	34.8	34.2
3	People act as if they think you are not smart	41.5	41.7
4	People act as if they are afraid of you	25.0	23.7
5	People act as if they think you are dishonest	33.1	30.2
6	People act as if they're better than you are	51.3	46.1
7	You are called names or insulted	35.3	24.6
8	You are threatened or harassed	12.8	11.7

Level of Student Perceptions on Bullying and Discrimination

The survey included two scales that measured whether the respondent had: (1) been a victim of bullying; (2) bullied others and used a 4-point Likert type scale (0 = No; 1 = Sometimes; 2 = Once a week; 3 = Several times a week). As shown in Table 4, a greater number of college students appear to be a *victim of bullying through peers influencing each other* (M = 0.48; SD = 0.73), followed by *victim of verbal bullying* (M = 0.17; SD = 0.48), and being a *victim of physical bullying* (M = 0.14; SD = 0.43).

The discrimination scale, which was measured by a 6-point Likert type scale (1= Never; 2= less than once a year; 3= a few times a year; 4= a few times a month; 5= at least once a week; and 6= almost every day) showed a concerning level of discrimination (M = 1.53; SD = 0.76) in the colleges.

Table 4*Level of Student Perceptions on Bullying and Discrimination 2016 and 2023*

Component	2016			2023		
	N	M	SD	N	M	SD
Victim of verbal bullying	2329	0.14	0.34	1652	0.17	0.48
Victim of bullying through Influencing others	2335	0.44	0.52	1652	0.48	0.73
Victim of physical bullying	2331	0.12	0.28	1652	0.14	0.43
Bullying others verbally	2303	0.14	0.28	1652	0.08	0.29
Bullying others physically	2307	0.06	0.23	1652	0.05	0.27
Everyday discrimination	2319	1.68	0.80	1293	1.53	0.76

Comparison of the Six Components in Terms of Demographic Variables

Three one-way multivariate analysis of variances (MANOVAs) were conducted between the six components: (i) *victim of verbal bullying*; (ii) *victim of bullying through influencing others*; (iii) *victim of physical bullying*; (iv) *bullying others verbally*; (v) *bullying others physically*; and (vi) *everyday discrimination* as dependent variables (DVs) and three demographic variables (*gender, year of study, and accommodation*) as independent variables (IVs) to check if there were any statistically significant differences in the student scores in terms of their gender (male and female), year of

study (1st, 2nd, 3rd, and 4th) and type of accommodations (campus hostel and off campus).

Inspection of a multivariate Box's M test showed significance in terms of all three demographic variables (gender, year of study and type of accommodation). This indicated that the homogeneity of covariance matrices of all the DVs was not equal across groups. Further, inspection of Levene's tests for each of the six DVs to check the homogeneity of variances revealed several significant and marginally significant results ($p > 0.05$) for each MANOVA indicating that there were differences between the groups of variables. However, inspection of standard deviations (SDs) for these DVs revealed relatively small differences (less than one scale unit of SD) between the various groups, which suggested that violation of the assumption of homogeneity of variances had not been serious.

The overall multivariate F-tests showed that *year of study* (Wilk's lambda = 0.981, MV F (18, 4630) = 1.726, $p = 0.029$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.006$), was marginally significant. The multivariate F-test showed no significant difference for *gender* and *accommodation*. Following the significant multivariate F-tests for *year of study*, univariate F-tests were examined to identify which of the components contributed to the marginal significance. According to the results of univariate F-tests, *year of study* showed marginally significant differences ($p < 0.05$) on two components- *victim of verbal bullying* and *everyday discrimination* (see Table 5).

Table 5

Tests of Between Subjects Effects

MANOVA effect	Dependent variable	df	Error	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Year of study	<i>Victim of verbal bullying</i>	3	1642	2.937	.032	.005
	<i>Everyday discrimination</i>	3	1642	4.531	.004	.008

Consultation of post hoc Tukey multiple comparison tests showed several marginally significant differences (see Table 6). The overall pattern for both components showed that senior student means are marginally significantly higher compared to their junior counterparts.

Table 6

Posthoc Tukey Multiple Comparison Tests on Year of Study

Component	Marginal significance	Mean and SD comparison
<i>Victim of verbal bullying</i>	1 st Year and 4 th Year students	1 st Year (M=0.16; SD=0.48) 4 th Year (M=0.27; SD=0.64)
	2 nd Year and 4 th Year students	2 nd Year (M=0.15; SD=0.44)
<i>Everyday discrimination</i>	1 st Year and 4 th Year students	1 st Year (M=1.50; SD=0.71) 4 th Year (M=1.72; SD=0.94)
	2 nd Year and 4 th Year students	2 nd Year (M=1.51; SD=0.73)

Findings and Discussion

The survey findings reported that about 36% of students experience at least one form of bullying at some point in their lives, down from 45% in 2016, and fewer reported bullying others (10.1% down from 18.1% in 2016). About 47% reported experiencing discrimination, lower than the 51% in 2016. The prevalence of reported bullying in both surveys is similar to that in the international literature (15-35%) (Duncan, 2010; Juvonen & Graham, 2012; Kekkes et al., 2014; Q'Moore et al., 1997; UNESCO, 2016). The findings of both surveys, together with the WHO Bhutan school survey (27%) (WHO-SEARO, 2017), and the similarities to research in many countries, warrant (further) attention. It remains the case that the prevalence of bullying and discrimination require increased attention, and review of policies, guidelines and practices.

As in the first survey, the senior students seem to have experienced more verbal bullying as well as discrimination. Perhaps it could be because they have lived longer in the colleges than their junior peers. Whatever the reason may be, the prevalence of bullying and discrimination in colleges is a serious issue that might lead to mental health issues in the long term.

While many responded in the 'any other comments' section that they were never bullied and that they have never bullied others, there were a few responses that seem to reflect the hopes of students, and the impact and types of bullying experiences, and 'college' culture.

3rd year student: *'I just want to be happy'*.

2nd year student: *'We are abused by senior boys, lots of sexual harassment is going on in the college. There is very little security and safety in college. We cannot even share to management because it will be later reflected in our character certificate. We are disturbed too much by drunkard here in college. We are bullied mentally by some teaching staffs. At night we don't get proper sleep due to drunkards making a lot of noises which is indirectly a part of bully'*.

2nd Year student: *'It's during my primary school that school teachers were very strict and friends used to threaten...if done so'*

The previous study informed a number of recommendations. While there appear to have been some reductions in prevalence, for example in bullying others and discrimination, the level of prevalence of experiencing bullying remains stable and high. It appears that there needs to be greater effort undertaken to ensure positive change in reduction of bullying and discrimination via measurable initiatives in policy and practice and monitoring. It would be appropriate to undertake a rapid audit of all colleges in Bhutan to ascertain the policies relevant to reduction of bullying and discrimination in each college; whether they are being implemented; what records are maintained of instances of bullying and discrimination; and what action(s) were taken in response to proven/accepted allegations of bullying and discrimination.

It appears that corporal punishment still occurs in schools across the country, as it does in monasteries for both monks and nuns (The National Commission for Women and Children and UNICEF Bhutan, 2016), despite the Bhutanese Ministry of Education's ban on corporal punishment since 2008. In a GNH society, teachers, and monks, should model compassion, care, honesty, and a positive attitude towards life. The Ministry of Education and Skills Development, and other relevant authorities

should undertake an audit of the use of corporal punishment, and enforce compliance of the ban where the practice is identified.

The findings in the 2016 survey indicated that college students who are in teacher preparation courses were more likely to be victims of all types of bullying. In addition, the situation for the senior college students appeared to be more problematic. In the 2023 sample, this has not been replicated, as gender was found not to be significant. While warranting further monitoring, this might indicate that the teacher preparation colleges may have strengthened anti-bullying and discrimination policies and interventions. Likewise, gender did not have a significant impact on results, and this may indicate that renewed policies and practices may have targeted young men and yielded positive results.

Education is recognised as a protective factor, especially so for young people from disadvantaged and or abusive family backgrounds, offering a pathway out of deprivation, and an opportunity to benefit from positive and safe interactions with teachers and fellow students (Dema et al., 2019; Duncan, 2010; UNESCO, 2016). As noted in the previous study (Choden et al., 2019), teacher formation is largely dependent on the student's beliefs and prior learning experiences; teacher preparation programmes play a vital role (Chong et al., 2011). It is important that pre-service teachers are trained to become caring and compassionate teachers. Issues associated with being bullied, being a bully, or both, may have significant implications for how individuals undertake their professional roles post-graduation. Those who were bullied may become bullies when in positions of power, such as in teaching. These cautions also apply to those in nursing and allied health courses, and even more broadly.

Research on the protective influence of WHO's 'health promoting schools' approach, adopted by a number of European countries, Australia, New Zealand, the USA, and Canada, has continued since the late 1980s and has identified mostly positive outcomes (Turunen, 2017). The approach might usefully be deployed in developing 'health promoting colleges', where such a concept is not already enshrined in their policies, procedures and ethos.

Conclusions

It is of concern that only minimal changes in the prevalence of reported bullying and discrimination appear to have occurred between 2016 and 2023; albeit the reductions represent some good news. The findings clash with Bhutan's GNH guiding philosophy. Given the large and consistent body of evidence identifying extensive negative impacts of bullying and discrimination in most countries, renewed efforts must be taken to achieve better outcomes, including audits and review of policies, guidelines, and practices. These issues require much more attention by the education sector [schools and colleges], other key stakeholders in government, government departments, the monastic system and local communities.

Limitations

The findings may not be fully representative of Bhutanese college students, given varied participation rates across the 15 colleges, and thus require cautious interpretation. The study, like most, uses self-report as obtaining reliable prevalence of actual events is mostly unobtainable, even where mandatory reporting is required. Likewise, students may have been reluctant to report being bullied, or bullying others,

possibly due to fear of being identified, minimising the experience as something they deserved or was of minimal importance, or its illegality (if actual violence).

In the first survey (Choden et al., 2019; Sherab et al., 2029) it was noted that a greater number of participants reporting being bullied came from the Education Colleges. Unfortunately, participation rates from the 15 colleges were uneven, and limited analyses to explore any associations with particular colleges. It remains an issue of significance that warrants greater attention in future studies via potentially stratified sampling to ensure equality of participation rates consistent with college student populations, and including questions that identify who bullied the participant: family, peers, community, fellow students, teachers, lecturers, or college staff. This report is based on a part of the larger study that explores 'legal and illegal drug use, mental health concerns and sexuality among college students in Bhutan'.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the Centre for Educational Research and Development ethical standards.

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