

# Developing a Sense of Place and Empathy Through an Oral History Project: An Exploratory Study at a Bhutanese College of Education

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The application of oral history as a technique for history education is well documented and steadily expanding. As a community-centred approach to place-based education, the use of oral history has demonstrated effectiveness for increasing student engagement, learning outcomes, and developing students' connections with their communities. Despite its promise as a historical education approach, oral history is still limited in its application within the Bhutanese educational context. Only recently introduced into the nation's secondary school curriculum, educators and students alike face challenges to implement and understand this authentic approach to critical

historical investigation. In this article, we explore how pre-service teachers were able to develop their sense of place, increase feelings of attachment to place and develop empathy for people and place by completing a structured oral history project in local communities throughout the country of Bhutan. Results taken from closed and open-ended surveys demonstrate how critical applications of oral history can serve as conduits for values-based learning outcomes. We anticipate this project will be a starting point for future exploration into the application and study of oral history as an educational approach within Bhutanese and Himalayan contexts.

## INTRODUCTION

The path of history education and the incorporation of oral history practice in the Bhutanese education system has been a process of constant re-evaluation. The nation's traditional educational systems were grounded in monastic practice where the focus was more on religious indoctrination and the philosophy of Buddhism. This early educational period laid a foundation for language, arts, literature and philosophy in Bhutan. Historically, the institution of monastic education began with the arrival of clergy statesman from Tibet and the establishment of the first monastic assemblage (Dratshang-Sangha) in 1621. Most of these monastic education institutions were imparted in the *dzongs* (fortresses) built in strategic locations. Today, while monastic education continues to play an important role, people now have the choice to study either in secular or religious schools. The modern education system was initiated by His Majesty King Ugyen Wangchuck in 1914. However, the planned modern education system in Bhutan began only in the 1960s.<sup>1</sup> Since this period of modernisation, the subject of history has been included as one of the core disciplines in Bhutan's education system.

The subject of history is considered to be a pathway to consolidating the timeless values and traditions that built Bhutan.<sup>2</sup> However, while history is now given more

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1 For information about the history of Bhutan's education system, see Brian D. Denman and Singye Namgyel, 'Convergence of Monastic and Modern Education in Bhutan?', *International Review of Education*, 54 (2008): 1. Available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40270045>.

2 See Mathew J. Schuelka and Tom Maxwell (eds), 'Education in Bhutan: Culture, Schooling, and Gross National Happiness', *Education in the Asia Pacific Region: Issues, Concerns (continued over page)*

attention in the school education system, it is not without challenges in curriculum and implementation. In the recent revisions to Bhutan's national curriculum structure, topics such as historiography, oral and local history were included. These concepts are novel to most Bhutanese history teachers. The Samtse College of Education, as the main teacher preparation institute of the nation, now carries the responsibility to prepare educators to teach these added themes. To this end, students completing their Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) in history and English are now required to complete an oral history project to fulfil their four-year course requirements. This study is a direct outcome of this oral history project and reports on the methodological experiences of B.Ed students.

To date, no empirical studies on student perceptions towards the subject of history in Bhutan have been conducted. Despite this lack of formal research, our personal experience of teaching and learning history in public schools and our interactions with tertiary students have revealed that history as a discipline is looked upon without much enthusiasm. Just as Demircioğlu learned through studying students' attitudes at the Fatih Faculty of Education at Karadeniz Technical University in Turkey, students of Bhutan have often found history boring and uninteresting because of its abstract nature of teaching concepts and the emphasis on rote memorisation as a learning method.<sup>3</sup> Such an approach presents history as a stagnant discipline and misses the opportunity of incorporating lived experiences into educational practice. To improve on these limitations of traditional historical education, educators should foster connections between their schools and the people in the local area.<sup>4</sup> Incorporating the study of oral history can be one of the powerful practices to build such connections. This is corroborated by Demircioğlu, who found that oral history can help make history lessons more interesting, enjoyable and understandable.<sup>5</sup>

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*and Prospects* 32 (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2016). Available at Education-in-Bhutan-Culture-Schooling-and-Gross-National-Happiness.pdf.

3 Ebru Demircioğlu, 'Teacher Candidates' Attitudes to Using Oral History in History Education', *Journal of Education and Training Studies* 4, no. 6 (2016): 184.

4 John F. Lyons, 'Integrating the Family and the Community into the History Classroom: An Oral History Project in Joliet, Illinois', *The History Teacher* 40, no. 4 (2016): 481.

5 Demircioğlu, 'Teacher Candidates' Attitudes', 184.

Since the introduction of the modernised education system in the 1960s, Bhutan's approach to history education has progressed through a series of evolutionary stages. The curriculum was nationalised and instructions were introduced with a strong emphasis on Bhutanese-ness in the early 1980s. The New National Education Policies (NEP) were also drafted, redrafted and improved over the years. One of the outcomes of the NEP was the so-called *Bhutanisation* of the curriculum including history. NEP implementation was an attempt to shift away from an original reliance on Indian and colonial British curricular influences. Educating for Gross National Happiness (GNH) program was the next big initiative of the Ministry of Education which aimed to prepare learners to develop values, ethics, skills and practices to build harmonious wellbeing in the early twenty-first century. One of the milestones in the education journey is the drafting and publication of Bhutan Education Blueprint 2014–2024 (BEP). BEP pointed out that there had been no major curriculum reviews of history and geography throughout the history of modern education in the country.<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, educational stakeholders within the country acknowledged the need to reform the history and geography curriculum, resulting in a rewriting of the national standard textbooks for these subjects. Additional recommendations emphasised the need to incorporate elements of Bhutanese values of GNH with twenty-first-century skills and pedagogy within the social sciences. The National School Curriculum Conference (NSCC) in 2016 articulated that the curriculum is relevant to the current national and global contexts to enable learners to be creative, communicative, collaborative, innovative and enterprising critical thinkers.

One of the outcomes of the curriculum reformation was the inclusion of the oral history component in the history curriculum framework. Oral history was never taught in Bhutanese schools before the curriculum revisions of 2016. A primary reason for the inclusion of oral history was to inculcate historical consciousness in learners and activate experiential learning in a subject that is otherwise perceived as dead and boring.

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<sup>6</sup> Ministry of Education, *Bhutan Education Blueprint 2014–2024* (Thimphu, Bhutan: Ministry of Education, Royal Government of Bhutan, 2014).

Numerous researchers have demonstrated how oral history can support active and experiential learning in students as envisaged in the Bhutanese history curriculum.<sup>7</sup>

Oral history can make history more interesting and counteract the traditional limitations of student engagement. Oral history is also apt in inculcating many soft skills that are required in the twenty-first century such as critical thinking, creativity, communication and problem-solving. In addition, educational research has demonstrated that when students learn in active, learner-centred, community-focused classrooms they meet and often exceed curricular standards.<sup>8</sup> Oral history provides self-exploration of history and through the exploration of their personal histories, students are better positioned to connect themselves, their families, and their community to the larger issues and places that comprise the world.<sup>9</sup> In the words of Llewellyn, Ng-A-Fook and Truong-White, 'The emerging move toward oral history as a potential pedagogy for doing history is part of a broader shift in history education that focuses on the development of historical thinking skills (rather than the memorization of historical facts)'.<sup>10</sup> The participatory and dialogical aspects of oral history education include engaging with the lived experiences of others and creating openings for different affective relations (such as empathy, humility and compassion to advance reconciliation). In addition, the use of oral history in education can engage students in understanding historical events as they are connected to community members' lived experiences. Personal narratives of oral history education can help students discover their indigenous traditions and cultural identity and develop a deeper understanding of the 'other' in their schools and communities. From interviewing community elders and leaders to creating and reading identity masks, oral history can be a process of self-recognition, through which students come to learn the historical contributions of indigenous communities to the nation, and build connections with students from different backgrounds.<sup>11</sup>

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7 See Demircioğlu, 'Teacher Candidates' Attitudes', 185.

8 Barry A. Lanman and Laura M. Wendling (eds), *Preparing the next Generation of Oral Historians: An Anthology of Oral History Education* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006).

9 Larry E. Hudson and Ellen Durrigan Santora, 'Oral History: An Inclusive Highway to the Past', *The History Teacher* 36, no. 2 (2003): 208.

10 Kristina Llewellyn, Ng-a-Fook Nicholas and Hoa Truong-White, 'Introduction: Telling Tales in Schools', *Oral History Education*, (Winter 2016): 97. Available at <https://www.academia.edu/21599421>.

11 Llewellyn, Nicholas and Truong-White, 'Telling Tales in Schools'.



**Figure 1** Bhutanese pilgrims on the sacred lake site, Tang Mebar Tsho. Photograph by Sangay Choden.

Oral history assists in the development of historical skills, content knowledge and understanding historical contexts.<sup>12</sup> A study in the United States found that when oral history is taught in schools, it contributes to students' increased comprehension of content, helps develop a positive attitude towards oral history, motivates students to study oral history further, and provides an enhanced educational experience.<sup>13</sup> Other benefits included providing students with the opportunity to ask questions they are interested in, and for human interaction, learning new historical content and research skills, supporting writing skills, valuing critical thinking skills and increasing students' personal connection to the past and the life of their community.<sup>14</sup> Oral history enables people to learn the perspectives of those who might not

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12 Karen Horn, 'Oral History in the Classroom: Clarifying the Context Through Historical Understanding', *Yesterday and Today* 11 (2014): 78.

13 Lorie Roy, 'Incorporating Oral History into the Curriculum', (*Literacy: Traditional, Cultural, Technological*, 23rd Annual International Association of School Librarianship, 17–22 July 1994, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania), 122. Available at <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED399957.pdf>.

14 Kathryn Walbert, 'Oral History in the Classroom', 10. Available at [http://www.aughty.org/pdf/oralhist\\_classroom.pdf](http://www.aughty.org/pdf/oralhist_classroom.pdf).

appear in the historical records. It has the potential to create new knowledge and challenge mainstream viewpoints.

Thus, the benefits of including oral history as an educational approach are far-reaching – spanning academic, social-emotional and community connection. Collectively, these outcomes point towards a rewarding academic experience that is far richer than the limitations of traditional history education. By basing a student's experience directly within their local communities, such an approach falls within the realm of place-based education (PBE).

### **PLACE MEANING DEVELOPMENT WITH ORAL HISTORY AS PLACE-BASED PEDAGOGY**

At its heart, PBE is an approach that connects learning to communities to increase student and teacher engagement, educational outcomes (academic and social-emotional) and community impact.<sup>15</sup> In the long-term, intentional applications of place-based approaches can lead to an increase in student agency, community connections and equity – in that *all* students see themselves as possessing the necessary skills and resources to be valuable members of a thriving community.<sup>16</sup> PBE leverages active learner-centred inquiry by using a student's community as their classroom. By situating learning in relevant local phenomena and people, the place-based approach then facilitates students to contextualise their learning with a broader global understanding.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, this type of community-engaged learning requires students to acquire and practise critical twenty-first-century skills such as collaboration, self and social awareness, problem-solving and innovation, as well as cultivating and activating social networks in their community.

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15 Gregory A. Smith, 'Place-Based Education', in Robert B. Stevenson, Michael Brody, Justin Dillon and Arjen E.J. Walls (eds), *International Handbook of Research on Environmental Education* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 213–20.

16 Tom Ark Vander, Emily Liebttag and Nate McClennen, *The Power of Place: Authentic Learning through Place-Based Education* (Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 2020), 5–6.

17 Gregory A. Smith and David Sobel, 'Place- and Community-Based Education: Definitions and Antecedents', in Gregory A. Smith and David Sobel (eds), *Place and Community Based Education in Schools* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 21.

While PBE has recently been popularised in the context of the Western educational spheres, its roots cannot be traced to a single theoretical tradition.<sup>18</sup> Antecedents of PBE span across diverse pedagogies and narratives such as indigenous traditions, progressive, environmental and rural education movements alongside critical pedagogy and its derivative philosophies.<sup>19</sup> By engaging in locally rooted and globally conscious learning opportunities, individuals can begin to build a holistic and multi-dimensional understanding of the places they inhabit, thereby fostering a sense of connection to their surroundings.<sup>20</sup> This idea of connection to place, or sense of place, resides at the foundation of place-based education.

A sense of place ‘encapsulates the relationship of humans to places’.<sup>21</sup> This concept serves as a connector between places and people; it connects personal interests, motivations and stories to a physical location, adding meaning to otherwise undefined space. A sense of place can be further understood by unpacking two separate but related concepts: the components of place meaning and place attachment. Continued investigation into place allows students to make interdisciplinary and symbolic meaning of their local contexts.<sup>22</sup> Many diverse forms of *place meaning* can be associated with the same place by different individuals and communities.<sup>23</sup> Alongside this cognitive growth, engagement with a particular place will often present opportunities for emotional growth. Through active exploration and opportunity for critical reflection, learners can deepen their emotional bond with a locality. These personal, emotional, affirmative bonds constitute an individual’s

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18 David A. Gruenewald, ‘The Best of Both Worlds: A Critical Pedagogy of Place’, *Educational Researcher* 32, no. 4 (2003): 3.

19 Charles Joseph Elfer, ‘Place-Based Education: A Review of Historical Precedents in Theory & Practice’ (PhD thesis, University of Georgia, 2011). Available at <http://rgdoi.net/10.13140/RG.2.2.34731.64800>.

20 Steven Semken and Elizabeth Brandt, ‘Implications of Sense of Place and Place-Based Education for Ecological Integrity and Cultural Sustainability in Contested Places’, in D. Tippins, M. Mueller, M. van Eijck and J. Adams (eds), *Cultural Studies and Environmentalism: The Confluence of Ecojustice, Place-Based (Science) Education, and Indigenous Knowledge Systems* (New York: Springer, 2010), 287–302.

21 Semken and Brandt, ‘Implications of Sense of Place’, 287.

22 Alex Kudryavtsev, Richard C. Stedman and Marianne E. Krasny, ‘Sense of Place in Environmental Education’, *Environmental Education Research* 18, no. 2 (April 2012): 229–50.

23 Nicole M. Ardoin, ‘Toward an Interdisciplinary Understanding of Place: Lessons for Environmental Education’, *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education* 11, no. 1 (2006): 115.

*place attachment*.<sup>24</sup> This concept of place attachment has been framed through the lens of two components, that of place identity (emotional attachment) and place dependence (functional attachment). When observed in tandem, such identity and dependence associations provide a holistic measure of an individual's attachment. A sense of place, therefore, can essentially be described as the combination of these two overarching phenomena: an individual's collective consciousness of specific place meanings and place attachments.<sup>25</sup>

Research has shown that a strong sense of place can foster positive attitudes and behaviours across a range of disciplines.<sup>26</sup> Recently described as 'an authentic, teachable, and assessable learning outcome for PBE', deepening a student's sense of place can lead to social and emotional growth, and fostering of dispositions towards stewardship of both natural and human communities. Oral history provides unique contributions towards the goals and traditional outcomes of place-based learning, particularly in developing a student's sense of place. The use of an oral history project to anchor an educational experience offers a direct opportunity for students to engage with their local communities as classrooms. In doing so, members of the local community become recognised as the 'sources of knowledge' as opposed to a textbook or even document analysis.<sup>27</sup> Via this approach, the 'live stories' that students engage with 'have lessons to teach that the printed page cannot'.<sup>28</sup> Educators and researchers engaging in place-based oral history projects have noted not only increased engagement and academic success following oral history projects but also instances where students can develop 'powerful personal testimonies of their experiences'.<sup>29</sup> Through the development of authentic relationships between people

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24 Lynne Manzo and P. Devine-Wright (eds), *Place Attachment: Advances in Theory, Methods, and Applications* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

25 Steven Semken and Carol Butler Freeman, 'Sense of Place in the Practice and Assessment of Place-Based Science Teaching', *Science Education* 92, no. 6 (November 2008): 1042–57.

26 Jerry J. Vaske and Katherine C. Kobrin, 'Place Attachment and Environmentally Responsible Behavior', *The Journal of Environmental Education* 32, no. 4 (January 2001): 16–21.

27 Amy B. Demarest, *Place-Based Curriculum Design: Exceeding Standards Through Local Investigations* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 109.

28 Demarest, *Place-Based Curriculum Design*, 110.

29 Francisco Guajardo, 'Teacher, Researcher, and Agent for Community Change: A South Texas High School Experience', *Journal of Global Initiatives: Policy, Pedagogy, Perspective* 2, no. 1 (2007): 26–42.

and within communities, students are able to deepen their sense of place while likewise growing in their capacity for social and emotional development. Opportunities to engage with those of different lived experiences provide authentic scenarios for students to practise and develop empathy.

## PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Keeping in view the need for teacher preparation in teaching oral history to secondary school students, an oral history project was introduced as part of the assessment in the Samtse College of Education at the Royal University of Bhutan. This project is a part of a methodological approach to teaching transferable skills; it not only taught skills to conduct oral history interviews but also to bring attitudinal change and to develop historical consciousness. As scholars such as Davey, De Welde and Foote have opined:

Oral history as a method provides opportunities to transfer skills and become active creators of historical documents and help students advance their historical consciousness. It further gives experience into first-hand account of the creation of historical knowledge and contests the fragmentary nature of primary sources. These intellectual developments offer meaning and resonance beyond the classroom.<sup>30</sup>

Our study sought to investigate how (if at all) a Bhutanese ‘sense of place’ could be developed through the use of oral history and how to teach and learn within local contexts. Concurrently, we wanted to understand how a place-based educational approach to oral history could help preserve, celebrate and promote Bhutan’s shared history and culture. To evaluate our success in achieving these ends, we gathered the perspectives of students who completed the oral history project as part of their Bachelor of Education in history and English. Students undertaking the module ‘Developing a Historical Perspective’ were required to complete a small oral history

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30 Frances Davey, Kris De Welde and Nicola Foote, ‘Oral History as Inspiring Pedagogy for Undergraduate Education’, *Oral History Education* (Winter 2016): 110–17. Available at <https://www.academia.edu/21599421>.

project. They were introduced to basic theoretical knowledge on the conduct of oral history and required to apply the theoretical knowledge in an authentic setting by conducting an inquiry study at a location of their choice.

Because this project was initiated at the onset of the 2020 COVID-19 Pandemic, students were stationed within their home communities across Bhutan and they participated in the course remotely due to college closure. Each student selected a local project site from within their community or the place they resided at during the period of online teaching and learning which had a topical focus and which enabled students to apply an applied oral history methodology.



**Figure 2** Gari village in the southern foothills of Samtse. Photograph by Alexander Sivitskis.

Students chose the topic depending on their interest. They were encouraged to explore diverse topics before selecting a final one. Students' choices were wide-ranging and included deities, temples, festivals and rituals. Because students come from all over Bhutan, it was not possible to do an oral history project that focused on one common community or locality. Most students chose to work within the

community with which they identified. This experiential learning allowed students to critically investigate their locality in a historical sense and generate new knowledge about the place, culture, religion and community.

Students collected information by conducting a range of local interviews and each student interviewed at least two people. These formal interviews were recorded digitally. However, students also had informal conversations with their kith and kin. Interviews and conversations took place in the respective respondents' homes and communities. The COVID-19 pandemic caused disruptions to normal life, and students maintained social distancing protocols. Schools and institutes were closed but, in the local communities, normal activities continued, and students were able to interview friends and relatives. Students sought respondents' consent to record, reproduce and interpret their information in accord with the ethical requirements of the college. Since students studied the people and place of their home community or the place where they were currently residing, their familiarity with people and place was an advantage with regards to ethical concerns. However, students were provided online lessons on ethical considerations in accord with academic protocols. It is worth pointing out that in Bhutan cultural differences are often openly discussed, acknowledged and celebrated. Further, Bhutan (unlike Australia) has not historically had governmental policies that focus on the erasure or domination of minority groups or cultures. Studying diverse cultures in Bhutan did not pose a risk to our students or their interviewees because they shared cultural experiences. The process of conducting oral history interviews built insider knowledge and understanding of their own culture and the culture of others.

Students interviewed a range of people – including parents, relatives, family friends and community members – who possessed in-depth knowledge of local community life and historic change. Interviews were recorded on mobile devices and later transcribed. The transcriptions were analysed and information was organised based on thematic requirements. The records were documented and maintained by individual students.

Each student prepared and submitted a draft project report and tutors provided feedback and comments to enhance the quality of their final report. Upon completion of this assignment, our team worked to assess how (if at all) these students' sense of place might have been influenced by their experience with oral history.

Sense of place in the assessment of PBE has been completed across a range of grade levels and disciplines. Quantitative measures usually include pre-post survey instruments assessing change in participant perception of place meaning and place attachment.<sup>31</sup> Qualitative methods offer more descriptive approaches to investigating the subjective and relational components of the sense of place, particularly for place meaning. For this reason, a mixed-methods approach featuring limited quantitative data and an emphasis on qualitative data was adopted.

Quantitative data was collected through two survey tools designed to measure students' place attachment and place meaning. Out of the 34 enrolled students, 18 students opted to participate in this study. Due to academic complications emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic, it was only possible to administer these survey instruments *after* the students completed their oral history projects. Thus, this study adopted a one-group post-test-only design. This weak experimental design significantly limits the interpretation of survey data. While survey questions were structured to enable students to reflect holistically on their experience with the oral history project, this design cannot replicate a paired pre-test post-test approach. Nonetheless, despite these limitations, these quantitative results are a means to provide deeper context and comparability with qualitative data.

A place attachment instrument survey contained 11 items with a two-dimensional response option.<sup>32</sup> Six items measured place identity or emotional attachment to place, and five items measured place dependence, or an individual's attachment

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31 Steven Semken, Emily Geraghty Ward, Sadredin Moosavi and Pauline W.U. Chinn, 'Place-based Education in Geoscience: Theory, Research, Practice, and Assessment', *Journal of Geoscience Education* 65, no. 4 (2017): 542–562.

32 The survey we adopted is the same as that outlined in Daniel Williams and Jerry Vaske in 'The Measurement of Place Attachment: Validity and Generalizability of a Psychometric Approach', *Forest Science* 49, no. 6 (2003): 830–840.

associated with the perceived potential of a place to conduct an activity (in this case, to complete oral history research). Initial applications of this survey instrument recorded promising measures of both item validity and generalisability, making this survey instrument a prime candidate to be adapted for this study. While a potential criticism is that these statements could be viewed as loaded questions, the positive nature of place-attachment response options improved the trustworthiness of potential responses. Survey participants ranked their agreement with each place identity and place dependence statement after reflecting on their project experience. Results from this survey are presented with simple descriptive statistics to summarise the overall class perceptions of respondents.

Place meaning was quantitatively measured through the adaptation of a survey instrument initially developed in Australia.<sup>33</sup> This instrument aims to measure the relative change in place meaning following place-based educational experiences. To complete the survey, respondents reflect on a series of place descriptors (adjectives or anecdotal conditions that people may regularly use to describe a place). To accommodate for limitations in post-test-only survey structure and administration, we requested respondents to simply identify the place descriptors that they thought best described their project sites both before and after completion of their oral history projects. Limitations in this reflective nature of data collection inhibit the direct attribution of descriptive causation towards the oral history project as its own. Nonetheless, we analysed the cumulative results from this survey to learn how descriptors reported as either cumulative increased, remained the same, or decreased via student responses after completion of their project.

Qualitative data was collected through 10 open-ended survey response items administered to participants separately from the quantitative data survey collection. As the ongoing COVID-19 situation prohibited in-person contact, participants were contacted to complete these questionnaires via telephone conversations with the option to respond independently through online submission. This qualitative data would have been

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33 See Martin Young, 'The Social Construction of Tourist Places', *Australian Geographer* 30, no. 3 (1999): 373–89, as cited in Semken and Freeman, 'Sense of Place', 1049.

collected face to face if not for the COVID-19 pandemic. Potential misinterpretations of interview questions and students' responses influence the data. As such, careful consideration was given to the questions to ensure clarity of ideas and responses as needed.

Five items were used to measure perceptions on students' place attachment to their project sites following their oral history work; of these, two items measured place dependence and three measured a perceived change in place identity. A subsequent four questions regarding place meaning and perceived change in place meaning were asked. A final question concerned student perceptions regarding the use of oral history within the educational approach. All responses were subjected to coding (with special attention documenting causal relationships) and subsequent thematic analysis. Results from these quantitative and qualitative surveys are presented below.

### **DEEPENING A SENSE OF PLACE THROUGH ORAL HISTORY**

Student responses to both the quantitative and open-ended qualitative survey items indicate that their experience with the oral history project expanded their sense of place in relation to their project sites. Overall, students reported that their participation in oral history led to the generation of new knowledge spanning multiple thematic lines of investigation including religious, cultural and community historical knowledge. This new knowledge manifests itself in expressions of expanded place meaning and a deepened attachment to place. In particular, students frequently mentioned that their work led to an increased 'sense of belonging' in relation to their project sites. This thematic 'belonging' closely aligns with the dimension of 'place identity' and is supported by the limited quantitative data.

Responses to all survey questions reflect that the students gained new knowledge through this oral history project and that they view this new knowledge as meaningful and important. In the religious and cultural dimension, students vividly expressed their deep understanding of religious personalities, deities, rituals and festivals located at their project sites. The opportunity to build their knowledge helped students strengthen connections with the communities in which they completed their research. Importantly, investigations into these religious understandings provided a pathway for students to

consider the close relationship of nature, occult practices and belief systems that lie intertwined within the heart of Bhutanese culture.



**Figure 3** Sacred temple at the base of a cliff in Bumthang. Photograph by Tenzin.

Responding to an open-ended survey question, Devi, one of the students who is in her early twenties, shared an experience of studying a sacred tract of the jungle near her home. Devi hails from a mountainous district in the south-east of Bhutan and resides close to major drainage that originates in the nation's high alpine headwaters and flows southbound into the Indo-Gangetic plains. Located on the boundary between this swift-flowing mountain stream and a thick subtropical broadleaf forest, Devi described that her study site is believed to be the residence of an important and powerful local deity. Through interviews with village elders, Devi was able to parse together the sophisticated relationship shared between the local people and this sacred place. She

describes this phenomenon as the ‘worship of *San sari Mata*’ [local deity] practised for timely and enough rainfall throughout the year’. Devi detailed how this act of worship is completed both for the best yield at the end of the agricultural growing season and ‘for peoples’ protection’. In later reflections, she described how, through her experience of conducting oral history interviews, she uncovered the ‘untold tales and even traditions and practices of the local community’. This experience resulted in a deepening of her local place knowledge. Such interactions with the local community enabled Devi to ‘make connections with many things that [she] had heard and seen around’. The opportunity to expand her knowledge of the meaning of previously known traditions led this student towards a deeper connection to her homeland. Devi consciously recognised this relationship in a concluding remark which stated that ‘the oral history process is not only about talking and listening but ... connect[ing] us to the society we are living [in]’. Through her critical investigation of the reciprocal relationship between human and nature in her home community, Devi deepened her sense of place. Similar sentiments were shared by many student participants when reflecting on their oral history experience.

Quantitative data collected via a closed-ended survey may provide additional context to these reflections on place meaning. Table 1 presents the results of the survey used to investigate the change in students’ perceptions of place meaning in relation to their work with local oral history projects. The three columns of the table share a list of common place descriptors (adjectives or anecdotal conditions that people may regularly use to describe a place). Each column represents a different category of student responses concerning their perceptions of these place descriptors. The leftmost column, ‘Descriptors with a reported increase’, shares a list of descriptors that students indicate they would now use to describe their study place as a result of their oral history work. In contrast, the column on the far right, ‘Descriptors with reported decrease’, shares a list of descriptors that respondents would initially have used to describe their place, but would no longer use following their oral history work. The middle column, ‘Descriptors without reported change’, outlines descriptors that respondents indicate neither increased nor decreased. When reviewed collectively, these responses may help to place student reflections on place meaning into further context.

DESCRIPTORS WITH REPORTED INCREASE	DESCRIPTORS WITHOUT REPORTED CHANGE	DESCRIPTORS WITH REPORTED DECREASE
educational	beautiful	remote
important to preserve	threatened	fragile
historical	tranquil	authentic
comfortable	exotic	crowded
unique		adventurous
culturally important		underdeveloped
interesting		ancient
spiritual		tropical
important for Bhutanese culture		dangerous
fun		overdeveloped
a privilege to visit		
pristine		
scenic		
unusual		
relaxing		
historically valuable		

**Table 1** Place meaning descriptors used for student survey. Items in the left column depict responses that increased following the oral history project. Values in the right column show responses that decreased following the oral history project, while values in the middle column show no change.

The left column of Table 1, ‘Descriptors with reported increase’, may shed the most light on how student perceptions of place meaning evolved as a result of their oral history work. The individual descriptors within this column indicate that students developed a diversity of new meanings associated with the places studied. The selection of words such as ‘educational’, ‘historically valuable’ and ‘culturally important’ to describe the study locations point towards a deeper and more critical understanding of local place meaning. As the participants in this project were working towards a degree in education, it is understandable that such meaning would emerge from their experiences. However, the inclusion of other descriptors in this category demonstrates that change in place meaning extended beyond simple educational context. Words such as ‘comfortable’ and ‘relaxing’ indicate that a psychological shift may have occurred for some individuals. Furthermore, while ‘spiritual’ certainly relates to the religious focus of many student projects, the breadth of this place meaning descriptor may well expand beyond the traditional spiritual and religious realms and relate to non-secular spirituality. Of important significance for local educators is the respondents’ selection of phrases including ‘important for Bhutanese

culture’ and ‘a privilege to visit’. Such indicators thematically align with the fundamental principles of educating for GNH, where the preservation and promotion of culture serve as a grounding pillar to the nation’s development philosophy (see section ‘Cultivating values’ for further discussion). Though these results are limited in their reliability as they are administered solely as a retrospective post-test, student perceptions on place meaning appear to be supported by responses to the open-ended questioning strategies.

Further examination of the qualitative data reveals variation in how students perceived changes to their concept of place meaning following their oral history investigations. In some cases, place meaning dramatically expanded. Reflecting on a project that investigated local knowledge regarding a sacred lake, Langamo, a female student in her early twenties, described how her ‘understanding was changed because thinking [of my study site] as a mere lake would have caused me to not know its importance’. Langamo completed her project in Bumthang Dzongkhag, a district in central Bhutan situated amongst four wide glacially carved valleys. Bumthang is both nationally and internationally recognised as a region of importance in Bhutan, and it is home to a multitude of significant religious and cultural sites. High altitude lakes, like the one Langamo chose to investigate, are often regarded as spiritually important and serve as a central component within intricate local folklore and tradition. In her responses to the open-ended questions, Langamo reveals how her investigations led her to uncover some of the narrative richness and local understanding that typically surrounds these sacred lakes.

In contrast to Langamo’s experience, other respondents describe a more nuanced perception of changes in place meaning. Kanchi is a student also in her early twenties, and her experience involving ethnic identity added a new lens to her investigation. Kanchi focused her project on her local village in the south of Bhutan. Reflecting on her project site, Kanchi shared how this small village nestled into the southern Himalayan foothills was surrounded by coconut and *doma* trees (Areca palm, *Areca spp.*). Her primary objective was to interview the dominant ethnic group of the village which hails from the Chhetri people, a local ethnic caste. Importantly, Kanchi identifies with a different ethnic caste, that of the Gurungs. When asked about how

she would describe her project site, she reported that her ‘description of my project site didn’t change at all due to my work on my oral history because it was [the] same as what I mentioned [before] as well as after’. However, while her description might not have changed, Kanchi later stated that she gained new knowledge through the application of the ‘technique and strategy to conduct oral history’. As such, it appears that Kanchi perceives her new knowledge as separate from how she might describe her study area.

Though some students’ descriptions regarding their project sites may have changed little in regards to their oral history work, the new knowledge that they generated led to a deeper sense of meaning. This divergence between ‘description’ and ‘understanding’ could potentially indicate how Bhutanese students believe that they have a common and surficial knowledge regarding the core concepts and stories around their localities, and they recognise this level of understanding can be deepened with detail gained through oral history practice. Regardless of the change in the description, students recognised how a deepening of place meaning increased perceived attachment to the places where they completed their oral history investigation. Students’ increase in place attachment is supported by their responses to both quantitative and qualitative measures.

Table 2 shows the average responses to the closed-ended survey questions regarding the two components of place attachment – place identity and place dependence. Students were asked to respond to each item along a five-point Likert scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree). The students were asked to contextualise their responses in relation to how they felt about their project site after completing their investigation. The cumulative average of all items, reported with a score of 4.02, appears to indicate that students have a moderately high sense of place attachment following their oral history project. Consideration of the items along the themes of place identity and place dependence provides even further context to this result. On average, students reported that the dimension of ‘place identity’ (that is, how students identify and relate) to their study site was higher than their perception of ‘place dependence’ (how important their study site is for the practice of oral history). This finding is well articulated in response to the open-ended survey questions.

PLACE ATTACHMENT QUESTION	AVERAGE RESPONSE (FROM 0 TO 5)	STANDARD DEVIATION
1. I feel my project site is a part of me.	4.36	0.564
2. The site of my project is the best place for oral history.	4.17	0.850
3. My project site is very special to me.	4.17	0.850
4. No other place can compare with my project site.	3.58	0.091
5. I identify strongly with my project site.	4.17	0.746
6. I get more satisfaction out of visiting my project site than any other place.	3.75	1.051
7. I am very attached to my project site.	3.80	0.865
8. Doing oral history at my project site is more important to me than doing it in any other place.	3.88	1.130
9. Studying oral history at my project site says a lot about who I am.	4.17	0.799
10. My project site means a lot to me.	4.04	0.889
11. I would enjoy doing oral history at a similar site just as much as I do at my project site.	4.17	0.799
Cumulative average	4.02	0.860

**Table 2** Average and standard deviation for responses to place attachment questions. Odd number questions reflect place identity, even number questions reflect place dependence.

An increase in place identity, as spurred on by the expansion or deepening of place meaning, appeared to be the driving force of developing local connection for the students. These findings are directly supported by the wide array of experiences shared by students in the open-ended survey. An example of this phenomenon was well articulated by the student Tawmo. Tawmo, also in her twenties, comes from a close-knit rural community in the Pema Gatshel Dzongkhag (district) of eastern Bhutan. Many people in Bhutan remark that the members of Tawmo's locality share a particularly strong sense of community vitality. This relationship is evident through a variety of social, cultural, economic and spiritual welfare activities that occur regularly. However, a general perception within the community is that the younger generations are becoming increasingly disconnected from community life. Time spent in modern educational institutions and more frequent visits to towns and semi-urban places are recognised as exposing the younger generations to a (rapidly developing) economic and materialistic society, and are considered primary drivers of disassociation with their

local community. These trends are reflected across Bhutan where accelerated modernisation of the country and an increased Anglo-European influence is contributing to a perceived decline in community vitality. Tawmo mentions that doing a project on her community opened up her enduring connection to the community to which she belonged: ‘I feel connected to my community because it gives me a sense of belongingness ... The person I am right now is all because of the community I belong to’.



**Figure 4** A typical village in central Bhutan. Photograph by Alexander Sivitskis.

This sense of belonging relates directly to how Bhutanese students define their cultural, personal and familial origins. The intricate relationship speaks to a larger and more complex understanding. As one student shared, they came to know their project site as ‘the place where I belong ultimately showing my identity as an individual’. Equally important is how some students stated that their new understanding led to a deepened connection to the place from which they originate.

This phenomenon was well described by a student named Sumjay. Sumjay’s project was completed in his home village within the dzongkhag (district) of Trashiyangtse,

a region known for its handicrafts and believed to be one of the original locations of agricultural cultivation in Bhutan. Recently, Trashiyangtse has experienced atypical periods of decreased rainfall, resulting in a noticeable decline in vegetable production. Stable precipitation is undoubtedly important to the communities of Trashiyangtse, both now and in the past. Accordingly, Sumjay focused his investigation on a local ritual that is performed for rainfall and protection within their village. Reflecting on his experience of gathering oral histories concerning this ritual, Sumjay shared this concluding insight: ‘I belong to that community but I have failed to know and understand what it holds and why it is so important to me’.

There is ample evidence of an increased sense of place in all student reflections on this oral history experience. However, while this building of a sense of place is a noteworthy outcome, perhaps even more profound are the subsequent changes in personal belief and action that developing a sense of place may lead to. In the following section, we share evidence from student responses that point towards a new understanding which transcends mere historical knowledge and demonstrates how students consciously and intuitively developed lifelong values.

### **CULTIVATING VALUES – DEEPER IMPACTS OF ORAL HISTORY EDUCATION**

In addition to developing knowledge, skills and dispositions, history lessons can help develop lifelong values like empathy. The Educating for Gross National Happiness (EdGNH) initiative intends to build values in learners to cultivate the idea of collective happiness in general. Empathy can be defined as ‘one’s ability to put oneself in another person’s place even if the other is a stranger to him or even if he thinks differently than himself’.<sup>34</sup> Although empathy as a value is not explicitly decreed within the EdGNH guiding documents, it is often intuitively recognised and sought after for integration in all lessons across the curriculum. However, empathy is an elusive concept and can mean different things to teachers, examiners and pupils.<sup>35</sup>

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34 Elisabeth D. Lazarakou, ‘Empathy as a Tool for Historical Understanding: An Evaluative Approach of the Ancient Greek Primary History Curriculum’, *International Journal of Social Education* 23, no. 1 (2008): 27–50.

35 Ann Low-Beer, ‘Empathy and History’, *Teaching History*, no. 55 (April 1989): 8.

Although history education can build empathetic capacity in students, the outcome of empathy is often not explicitly included in the curriculum among the skills which are to be taught in the history class.<sup>36</sup> Recent research by Lazarakou indicates that ‘the cognitive and affective aspects of historical empathy may be realized in history classrooms through the use of primary sources, group work, discussions, and additional research’.<sup>37</sup> Our research indicates that student engagement in oral history projects also assists in the development of empathy.

As shared in the previous section, Kanchi’s story revolved around her investigation into a local village populated by an ethnic group different from her own. Kanchi’s description of her project site didn’t change as a result of her oral history work, however, her understanding and connection to the site increased. Kanchi provided the following elaboration:

While working on my project site I came to know [people from the Chettri caste] more through their culture, language, life, and style and many more where I could understand and feel them in deeper level resulting to a strong bond.

When asked how her connection to her project site may have changed as a result of this oral history work, Kanchi stated:

After my oral history to my project site, I could feel more connected and feel like one of them [i.e. people from a different ethnic caste]. Through listening to and discussing their community, it created a familial relationship among us.

Kanchi explicitly went beyond describing historical content to expressing an authentic sense of empathy and connection to a community different from her own. Another student, Khawjay, who investigated the people and culture of a small community in south-western Bhutan had a similar experience.

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<sup>36</sup> Lazarakou, ‘Empathy as a Tool’.

<sup>37</sup> Lazarakou, ‘Empathy as a Tool’.

Khawjay completed his project in an ethnically diverse community located in Samtse Dzongkhag. This region in south-western Bhutan is diversely populated with a mixture of communities claiming both indigenous and/or longstanding traditional origins alongside other recent migratory populations of varying ethnic backgrounds. Recent resettlement patterns have substantially increased this community diversity. While the diversity is generally acknowledged, many residents of Samtse often claim to lack a holistic comprehension of the scale and expanse of the evolving cultural integration. Khawjay's experience indicates that his oral history work not only expanded his understanding of this local complexity but also helped forge an empathetic relationship with people and place. Khawjay focused on learning more about the Subba people, another ethnic caste. While Khawjay does not identify with the Subba caste, his investigation into their unique 'language, dresses, culture, festivals and traditions' resulted in him feeling 'very much connected to the history project site'. Reflecting on the personal impact this oral history project had for him, Khawjay stated:

During this project, I got lots of information on culture and tradition. I also got information on the living standard of the people living in that particular place. I feel very much connected to my project site community. While doing this project I could interact with many people which gave me feelings of brotherhood. After this project, I felt that we all are connected having the same culture. My level of connection changed due to my work on oral history because while working on my project site I came to know many people through their culture [and] their living standard, as a result I could understand them better and deeper.

Unprompted, students such as Kanchi and Khawjay expressed a deeper level of empathy that critical historical education attempts to attain. According to Lazarakou, students identify themselves with historical persons and observe history through the eyes of those who lived it.<sup>38</sup> Students also 'understand the thoughts and motives of historical persons, realize their circumstances, appreciate their impediments

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38 Lazarakou, 'Empathy as a Tool', 28.

and assess the consequences of their actions’.<sup>39</sup> These sentiments are supported by Petersen and Edmunson-Morton, who found that conducting oral history classes ‘built students’ historical empathy and stimulated their curiosity about the past, and raised their appreciation for historical sources and historical actors’.<sup>40</sup> These findings are applicable within a Bhutanese context; our student responses demonstrate that undertaking an oral history project, particularly in diverse communities, helped develop students’ sense of place in relation to their home, while subsequently fostering the development of empathy. Such learning, we contend, embodies what many Bhutanese educators strive towards when they aim to educate for Gross National Happiness.

### ATTITUDES ON ORAL HISTORY EDUCATION

Oral history needs to be emphasised in the Bhutanese history education system due to the emerging need to preserve historical knowledge to mitigate the potential loss of profound wisdom and information. As a result of their experience, our students perceived the grave danger of losing historical knowledge. Many respondents reflected that doing an oral history project has connected them to people in the community and may help preserve information, develop a sense of belonging, and preserve culture and tradition. This sense of belonging and attitudes towards preserving culture aligns with one of the pillars of Gross National Happiness which is the preservation and promotion of culture and tradition. As a student named Chungkila, who comes from a mountainous region of south-central Bhutan, put it,

Oral history education is interesting where we can hear different stories and know how important it is to know our community tales. I feel it is important to preserve oral history in writing form for a coming generation

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39 Lazarakou, ‘Empathy as a Tool’, 28.

40 Chris Petersen and Tiah Edmunson-Morton, ‘Fostering Historical Empathy in Unusual Times: A Case Study of the Course “OSU, Women and Oral History: An Exploration of 150 Years”’, *Society of American Archivists*, Case Studies on Teaching with Primary Sources (2018): 1–25. Available at [TWPSCase\\_3\\_Fostering\\_Historical\\_Empathy.pdf](#).

because narration changes every generation and information gets substrate and adding new thoughts of their own.

Another participant Sumjay (introduced previously), from far-east Bhutan, also shared a similar thought:

Oral history is very important. It is like a wholesome education that every citizen of the country must know about their past, present and preserve for the future. If [we fail] to recognize the importance, it is already on the verge of extinction and my speculation says it won't last much [longer].

These responses demonstrate how oral history education can thus augment the preservation and promotion of historical Bhutanese consciousness.

Further, students undertaking the project identified oral history as a precise pedagogy in imparting local historical knowledge and a powerful teaching tool. This understanding is significant for trainee teachers because, if transferred to future practice, it would have an immense impact on their teaching in real classroom settings which requires attention to differentiated learning. The relevance and effectiveness of oral history as a pedagogical approach is evident in student reflections. For example, one respondent, Langamo, reflected 'I find oral history education an interesting aspect of covering a wide range of information just through verbal words. Hearing the oral histories has a different essence of enjoying the content'.

Students' responses indicate that the oral history project increased their engagement with the course beyond traditional methods. The change in attitudes and their increased levels of commitment towards cultural preservation were a result of their immersion and in-depth knowledge gained through their projects. As Sonam, who was based near a small community in Chukha Dzongkhag adjacent to the national highway, said: 'I feel belonging but after the project, I felt dedicated and committed to the community because now I know more than before'. An increase in his disposition towards civic engagement followed Sonam's critical interaction with his home community. Sentiments like these were common among student responses and were a primary reason students gave for the desirability of oral history education being emphasised in

school and university curricula. Importantly, students likewise recognised that more engagement in oral history is required to prevent the permanent loss of important generational knowledge. Pedagogically, this project has demonstrated how student work with authentic oral history can have a lasting impact on local Bhutanese communities by preserving stories and knowledge about a place for future generations. A central philosophy that permeates the Bhutanese approach to educating Gross National Happiness is that the preparation for ‘right livelihood’ is inherently tied with strengthening community vitality. Through applications of place-based oral history, it appears that students within this project took one step closer to this goal.

## CONCLUSION

This study demonstrated that oral history as a place-based pedagogy successfully supported Bhutanese students in their historical investigations of local places. Responses to survey items indicate that students gained a multidimensional and critical understanding of their project sites. These responses also demonstrated that students deepened their sense of place by expanding their concepts of place meaning and strengthening emotional connection through place attachment. The development of a sense of place and an increase in historical knowledge are mutually supportive learning outcomes. Expressions of empathy evident in student responses demonstrate that this approach resulted in values-based learning. Further, these oral history projects provided an opportunity for students to develop historical skills that would cascade into the classrooms of these future teacher participants. These results indicate that oral history projects can help actualise the Bhutanese GNH principles for wellbeing and happiness. Due to limitations in the survey conditions for this study caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a need for deeper research in contextualising GNH through classroom lessons via oral history and other academic activities.