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From Ritual to Responsibility: Rethinking Environmental Citizenship in Bhutanese Schools

Sonam Dorji and Rick Flowers
Paro College of Education and University of Technology Sydney
Corresponding email: sonamdorji.pce@rub.edu.bt

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Abstract

Environmental citizenship is increasingly recognised as an important goal of education, yet in many contexts it is fragmented across subjects or approached primarily through scientific knowledge, with limited attention to its ethical, cultural, and civic dimensions. In Bhutan, this raises questions about how schooling can build on existing forms of environmental responsibility embedded in everyday life. This study examines the role of social studies in supporting environmental citizenship, particularly in middle schools. Drawing on a qualitative ethnographic case study, data were collected through interviews with teachers and parents, classroom and school-based observations, and analysis of curriculum and policy documents. The findings of the study show that environmental responsibility is not new for young Bhutanese students. These responsibilities are lived and practised in their daily lives at home and in the community. However, school-based practices often focus on routine activities with limited integration of meaning, values, and lived experience. The paper argues that social studies has a potential to connect ecological knowledge with cultural values, ethical reasoning, and civic responsibility. It suggests that strengthening such curricular spaces is essential for supporting contextually grounded environmental citizenship in Bhutanese education.

Key words: Spiritual ecology, environmental citizenship, lived experiences

Introduction

Bhutan is known worldwide for its environmental leadership. It absorbs more carbon than it emits, making it one of only three carbon-negative countries in the world (DorjiW & Flowers, 2023). About 71% of the country has primary forests, and the national constitution mandates at least 60% must stay that way. Bhutan has leading environmental stewardship policy initiatives such as Gross National Happiness and Green School for Green Bhutan that strengthen its international standing. However, Bhutan sits in the Himalayan region, which is under significant ecological pressures, steady glacial melting and environmental degradation caused by high greenhouse emissions, especially from its neighbours China and India. In such a context, it becomes especially paramount that Bhutan prepares its young people with a strong and grounded sense of environmental citizenship.

This paper's initial concept emerges from an observation that environmental responsibility is not new in Bhutan. The majority of young Bhutanese grow up in communities where environmental care is part of their daily everyday activities. Reverence for landscape, such as waterways, mountains and forests, and their commitment to fulfilling community' expectations about cleanliness and care contribute to shaping environmental responsibilities.

On the other hand, there is clear tension between this inherent environmental responsibility and how environmental education is often enacted in schools. In classroom lessons, students are introduced to environmental issues through textbook content, often taught within topics such as carbon emissions or pollution. Although these activities are worthwhile, students often view them as tasks that must be completed. Consequently, there is little space to explore or question why this matters, how it connects to longstanding Bhutanese cultural values, and how it relates to broader environmental challenges. It can, therefore, turn into procedural learning rather than meaningful environmental learning. Here, the gap is evident: school contexts, where environmental learning can become routine and compliance-driven, and home and community contexts, where it is relational and lived.

This paper makes the case that social studies has the potential to close this gap. It can incorporate knowledge, values, culture, and civic responsibility, and foster environmental responsibility not only from a scientific perspective, but also from a lived social and ethical lens. In the Bhutanese context, learning is shaped by a rich spiritual ecology and deeply rooted cultural practices. However, social studies has now been removed from the primary curriculum, raising questions about how such integrative learning will be sustained in the foundational years.

This argument is developed through a qualitative ethnographic study that investigates how environmental citizenship is understood and practised across home, community, and school contexts in Bhutan. The findings reveal that while environmental responsibility is deeply rooted

in everyday life, it is fragmented and reduced to routine activities in schools. Thus, it begs the question of why classroom learning is disconnected from what is lived and meaningful in homes and communities. The paper, therefore, suggests that strengthening the role of social studies could help bridge this gap by reconnecting environmental knowledge with lived experience, and by supporting forms of environmental citizenship that are meaningful, culturally grounded, and relevant to Bhutan's contemporary context.

Where is/are the research question/s? For the readers, it is important to have research questions.

Literature Review

When environmental learning becomes procedural rather than meaningful

Environmental citizenship is beyond simply knowing or knowledge about environmental issues - that includes responsibility, participation and action (Dobson, 2003; 2007). It is more about developing a sense of ethical responsibility and the ability to act within social and cultural contexts. However, in many school settings, environmental learning is often organised into structured activities that largely convey procedural forms of knowledge and practice. This includes:

- learning facts about environmental issues without deeper engagement;
- completing set activities such as recycling, cleaning, or planting;
- following rules about environmental behaviour without understanding their broader significance.

These approaches are not without meaning; they have certain values. They can develop awareness and encourage participation among young students. However, research suggests that when environmental learning is limited to activities or rule following, students may not develop a deeper understanding of why these actions matter or how they connect to their own lives (Crossley, 2019; Parker & Prabawa-Sear, 2020). Effective environmental citizenship, by contrast, advocates connecting knowledge with:

- values – why the environment matters;
- culture – how environmental responsibility is understood locally;
- responsibility – what individuals and members of communities should do.

This shift needs educational approaches that include multiple ways of knowing. There is growing recognition that scientific knowledge alone cannot sufficiently address environmental challenges. Instead, environmental education should create space where scientific understanding and local or traditional ecological knowledge complement each other (Berkes, 2012). Such an approach

enables students to understand environmental issues not only as technical problems, but as lived and ethical concerns embedded in everyday life.

Age-appropriate teaching of environmental citizenship

Soble (1996) and Strife (2012) suggest that complex environmental issues may be too abstract or may create anxiety for children aged up to 12 years old. They argue environmental education in the early and middle years should focus on simple and positive experiences of nature. However, Chawla (2006, 2007), Chawla and Nasar (2015), Činčera et al. (2020), Liefländer and Bogner (2014), and Otto et al. (2019) challenge this view. They argue that children in the middle years - between nine and 15 - are capable of:

- understanding environmental issues when they are connected to local contexts;
- participating in meaningful environmental actions;
- developing values and attitudes that shape long-term behaviour. -

We glean from a review of literature that the issue is not whether students are capable, but how environmental learning is designed. When learning is constituted through the following:

- grounded in students' everyday experiences
- connected to their communities
- supported through discussion and reflection.

Students are able to engage in ways that are both age appropriate and meaningful. The middle years therefore represent a critical stage. During this period, students begin to form more stable values, identities, and understandings of responsibility. Educational experiences at this stage can shape whether environmental citizenship is understood as abstract knowledge or as something lived and practised.

Spiritual ecology and its relevance for Bhutanese home-grown environmental education

Key to our analysis is what role do schools play to teach environmental citizenship to Bhutanese young people between nine and 15 years old. In Bhutan, environmental responsibility is not introduced for the first time in school. It is already present in everyday life. Students learn through:

- participation in cleaning and caring for shared spaces;
- expectations within families and communities;
- cultural and spiritual beliefs about respect for nature.

Of course, parents, monks and other adult figures play an important role in facilitating learning about the above. These practices are often not described as environmental education, yet they play a central role in shaping how young people understand responsibility toward the environment.

In Bhutan, spiritual and cultural traditions are particularly important. Reverence for sacred sites, beliefs about local deities, and moral expectations about how one should treat the natural environment contribute to a form of environmental understanding that is relational. Environmental responsibility is therefore not separate from daily life but embedded in how people live and relate to their surroundings. This aligns with scholarship on spiritual ecology, which highlights how environmental care is embedded within belief systems, ethics, and community practices (Allison, 2019; Sponsel, 2012). It also reflects theorising about traditional ecological knowledge, which emphasises the role of local knowledge systems in supporting sustainable practices (Berkes, 2012).

We argue that these forms of home-grown Bhutanese knowledge are not fully recognised within formal schooling (DorjiW & Flowers, 2023, 2026). Environmental learning in schools, instead, is often shaped by curriculum models that emphasise standardised or scientific approaches. This can create a gap between what students already know and experience in their everyday lives, and what they encounter in the classroom.

The gap between policy and classroom practice in Bhutan

There is a strong cross-curricula commitment to environmental sustainability in Bhutan. The Bhutanese policy of Gross National Happiness and Green School initiative emphasise holistic development, environmental responsibility, and the integration of non-material values within education. It is easy to theorise about this commitment. It is, however, much harder to implement it (DorjiW, 2025). Typically, Bhutanese schools try to implement the above through:

- participatory clean-up actions;
- compartmentalising environmental content into topics;
- field trips;
- environment clubs that get students to tend to plants and trees in the school grounds.

As a result, environmental education may focus on superficial actions rather than deeper engagement with meaning, values, and responsibility. This pattern reflects a broader challenge in education systems where locally grounded knowledge coexists with externally influenced curriculum models (Crossley, 2019). While policy frameworks in Bhutan emphasise integration and holistic learning, classroom practices may still be shaped by pressures such as:

- time constraints;

- assessment requirements;
- expectations of content coverage.

These factors can limit opportunities for teachers to connect environmental learning with students lived experiences and cultural contexts.

Why social studies matters for environmental citizenship

Environmental education is typically compartmentalised across subjects, particularly within science. Furthermore, while science plays an essential role in helping students understand ecological systems, it does not always address questions such as:

- Why should we care about the environment?
- How do cultural beliefs shape environmental responsibility?
- What does it mean to act responsibly within a community?

These questions are central to environmental citizenship.

Social studies is, or was, a cross-disciplinary stream in Bhutan's middle years. Starting 2026 it was discontinued with roll-out of a Cambridge model. We argue that social studies offers a cross-curricular space where the questions mentioned above along with environment topics, can be amalgamated as it brings together history, physical and human geography, and earth sciences.

We advocate for citizenship education that pursues cross-curricula and experiential approaches (Banks, 2008; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). In the Bhutanese context, social studies also provides opportunities to connect environmental learning with local practices, spiritual beliefs, and community knowledge. Sonam DorjiW's (2025) doctoral research suggests, however, that in Bhutan's schools, these possibilities for environmental education are not always fully realised in classroom practice. Teaching remains focused on content coverage rather than deeper integration. This points to the need to more intentionally position social studies as a space for meaningful environmental learning.

Methodology

The empirical data was collected during Sonam DorjiW's (2025) doctoral research. It was a qualitative and phenomenological study. An ethnographic type of case study in one middle secondary school was conducted. This included classroom observations, loosely structured conversations with students and teachers and analysis of teaching materials including lesson plans.

The data was analysed through an interpretive, rather than grounded, lens. That means there was

a clearly articulated theoretical framework that informed that analysis. The main theoretical lens were 'thick and thin' learning, 'useful and really useful' knowledge, and then spiritual ecology (Heggart, 2018; McLaughlin, 1992; Sponsel, 2020; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004;). These theoretical frameworks underpinned the thematic coding of the interview and observation data, as well as analysis of teaching materials and curriculum documents.

Research Site and Sampling

Interviews were conducted with 12 in-service teachers, each from a different school across the country. To complement this, an ethnographic case study of Karmic Middle Secondary School (a pseudonym), was undertaken, allowing a more in-depth analysis of classroom practices and semi-structured interviews with 11 parents.

Table 1 presents details of the research sample including geographical and demographic information plus data collection methods.

Table 1. Research sample and data collection methods

Participant group	Number	Data collection method	Notes
Parents	11	Semi-structured interviews	Backgrounds included farming, local commerce, and civil service
In-service teachers	12	Semi-structured interviews	In-service teachers drawn from both rural and urban schools, representing 12 different schools
Teachers	4	Classroom lesson, school activities observations	Perspectives captured during the field observation in the case study school, Karmic Middle Secondary school
Students	Classes 4, 6 and 8.	Not formally interviewed	Informal conversations and participant observation

Findings: From Experiential and Relational Practice to Procedural Schooling

Dorji W (2025) found two different facets of environmental learning in Bhutan: how students

experience environmental responsibility in their everyday lives and how they learn in school. For this paper, two terms are deployed to describe this distinction:

- *Experiential practice* is a form of learning through direct experience in nature.
- *Relational practice* is learning through relationships with family and community. Students learn by taking part in everyday activities and by sharing values and way of life (thick and really useful knowledge).
- *Procedural schooling* refers to environmental education that is structured around pre-defined tasks, routines, and regulations (thin and useful knowledge). Although students take part in activities, they might not always delve into grasping deeper meaning and relevance.

Environmental responsibility through experiential and relational practices

Research participants, across interviews and field observation, described how children learn to care for the environment through everyday life. Students participate in activities, a few examples as given below:

- Cleaning their surroundings.
- Caring for plants and animals.
- Maintaining shared spaces.

These activities go beyond daily chores. Children are involved in helping farm work, collecting firewood, shepherding and participating in seasonal practices, such as collecting wild vegetables and fruits from the natural environment. These activities are not usually taught as formal environmental lessons. They are part of daily responsibilities within the family and community. A parent, Gaysang, who is a farmer, explained that “children are expected to help clean the surroundings. It is not something we teach as a lesson, it is just part of our daily life”.

Other parents expressed similar views. They mentioned that their children learn through participation rather than being told. They also shared that the environmental responsibility develops gradually as young children take part in everyday tasks and meet expectations within the household. In this context, environmental responsibility is learned:

- through experience (by doing and participating);
- through relationships (within families and communities);
- through shared expectations, rather than formal instruction.

Practising cultural and spiritual beliefs further strengthen this learning. When asked about the

connection between environmental education and spiritual beliefs, parents talked about taking their children for a visit to monasteries or holy sites. In Bhutan, most monasteries and holy sites are nestled within natural landscapes and often require hours of walking through dense forests to reach. Parents said they see such visits as an opportunity to instil the value of nature. For instance, Gaysang, a public servant stated that "taking children to holy sites teaches them about nature and Bhutanese culture because it has rich culture there".

Similarly, a parent who is an academic, Yenug, added that "at home I turn off the television in the evenings and tell stories that has moral values and then make a point to visit holy sites once a while to connect with those moral stories". On a similar line, Gayzam explained that "we perform rituals at home, I think this shows how important these cultural values are for us, and children watch us doing this".

Parents reflected on walking through the natural landscape while on a visit to holy sites, and they perceived this as an opportunity to talk to their children about the spiritual essence of nature. On this note, another parent, Drachoe, recounted:

> I remember taking my son and his four friends to the Tiger's nest, called Taktsang monastery, and we also went to the top-most place, another monastery above Taksang, which is most sacred. We had to walk for many hours through forest and cliffs, and I shared with them the significance of the natural landscape, and that one should not think bad of others or do bad to nature because the spirits will harm us. And the caretaker also explained the significance of the monasteries and holy sites there. So this is one example I do for my children to teach about our traditional knowledge. If we don't do this, there is a risk of such knowledge will be lost in future.

In schools, teachers observed that most students often bring such knowledge from home into the classroom. Students demonstrate awareness about environment even without formal teaching. Students themselves recognised this at home. One of them said, "we initiate to take care of the environment and not throw things anywhere, and this is what we learn. We feel it is our responsibility".

Students further described that they learn through direct involvement in everyday activities, and through their relationships with people, place, and cultural beliefs. Environmental responsibility is not fragmented into parts like knowledge, values, and action. It is experienced as a whole, in a connected and lived way. -

Environmental education in schools: Superficial activities and procedural learning

In Bhutanese schools, environmental responsibility is visible and actively promoted through the curriculum and through activities linked to GNH and Green School programmes. However, when

it comes to implementation, it is often organised through structured activities and routines tasks. Common practices include:

- daily school cleaning programmes;
- participation in Green School activities;
- community clean-up campaigns;
- school assembly messages about cleanliness and responsibility.

We suggest that, seen through the lens of environmental citizenship education, these are superficial activities. In addition, our interviews and observations showed that these activities are often scheduled at fixed times, particularly before the morning assembly. They are also organised during the Saturdays and are carried out collectively by students across different grades or classes. Teachers assign specific areas to students from different classes, reinforcing responsibility through structured organisation. These activities are regularly implemented, which forms an important part of school life. However, they are usually carried out as expected tasks. As one student said, "we clean the school every morning. It is something we have to do before class".

Other students similarly described these activities as routine obligations, often linked to school expectations rather than personal motivation. Teachers also described these practices as part of school discipline. For instance Tshojam, a social studies teacher explained that "students are given responsibilities to clean and take care of the school environment. It is part of their daily routine, and it is compulsory for all students".

Some teachers believe that such activities help maintain order and cleanliness within the school. In other words, it suggests that the environmental responsibility is closely tied to discipline and behaviour management.

Furthermore, it was found that messages about environmental activities are often communicated through instructions. Chalep, a social studies teacher mentioned that "during the morning assembly, when all students are gathered, we remind our them to keep the school environment clean and follow school rules on taking care of environment, such as school garden and classrooms".

This clearly reflects that environmental messages are frequently delivered in a superficial manner, often repeated daily, with limited opportunity for discussion or student reflection. While these practices, in some cases, encourage students' participation, they are often focused on what students should do, rather than why these actions matter.

Document analysis of lesson plans showed a similar pattern. Environmental topics were included in the curriculum, but were often treated as:

- discrete topics;
- short activities;
- content to be covered.

Classroom lesson plans reveal that teachers are most concerned about completing subject syllabus requirements. The lesson consists of activities that are designed to meet pre-defined lesson objectives, leaving limited space for deeper inquiry or for connecting to students lived experiences. There was limited evidence of sustained engagement with:

- cultural meaning;
- ethical responsibility;
- students' own experiences.

This suggests that while schools play an important role in promoting environmental practices, these are often experienced as routine and compliance driven. They are not always understood as approach to environmental responsibility.

When learning becomes compliance rather than meaning making

In the interviews, most classroom teachers expressed that routine activities like clean-up campaigns were primarily about compliance with top-down directives rather than fostering genuine, bottom-up environmental citizenship. The point to draw attention to is that students are engaging in compliance rather than deepening knowledge and understanding, let alone developing an attitude of stronger environmental sensibility. For instance, students are assigned tasks for waste management but are not actively engaged in designing, researching, or evaluating their practices. This often leads to compliance-driven behaviours rather than critical inquiry.

The Socially Useful Productive Work program (SUPW) that is conducted every morning aims to promote civic responsibility and environmental awareness. However, its implementation is predominantly top-down, limiting opportunities for students to collaboratively analyse problems and reflect on outcomes. On the other hand, during informal conversation with students, they narrated how at home and in the community, environmental responsibility is learned through experience and relationships. Their learning is shaped by participation, observation, and a shared sense of responsibility within families and communities. By contrast, at school, similar actions are typically experienced as requirements. A Class 6 student explained justified thus: "at home, we take care of the environment because it is important, but in school, we just do it because we are told to do it".

This highlights a shift from:

- experiential and meaningful learning to task-based participation;
- internal understanding to external instruction.

None of the middle school students shared any account of being supported to independently decide whether they should, and if so how and when, to initiate action to curb litter, discourage drugs, and address waste and watershed management in their local communities. We are not dismissing the potential value of teaching and learning that is currently taking place through requiring students to undertake experiential learning activities of cleaning and managing waste. We argue, however, that these activities would have even more potential if they were to go beyond civic participation and to advance education for environmental citizenship. The risk of not supporting the students to make meaning and put into action can be illustrated by the example of students choosing to bring litter from their homes into schools. We observed that students felt they are under pressure to find litter on their way to school. To avoid the embarrassment, they chose to play it safe by bringing litter from their home. The point here is that students are pursuing an act of compliance-driven learning.
Teachers were aware of this tension. Mani, a social studies teacher, reflected, "we want students to understand why it is important, but most of the time we focus on completing activities and following routines, as we do not give marks or assess for such activities".
Similarly, Jorpen, a teacher from a rural school, similarly observed that "students follow what is required in school, but it does not always connect with what they experience outside the schools".

These perspectives were consistent across both rural and urban school contexts, revealing that the issue is not limited to a particular setting but reflects broader patterns in how environmental learning is structured within schools. We observed that school-based environmental learning can, at times, reduce rich experiential and relational practices into simplified routines. In doing so, forms of environmental responsibility that are meaningful in everyday life may begin to feel like compliance in school. This limits opportunities for deeper understanding and genuine connection.

Meaningful learning: Blending experiences with reflection

We are interested to build possibilities for more practical and deeper, meaning-making approaches to environmental learning in schools. We observed that, alongside routine practices, some teachers tried to move beyond task-based activities. They aspire to build on students' home-grown knowledge about environmental care and responsibilities through designing activities that encourage reflection. Although these efforts to foster deeper and more action-oriented environmental citizenship were not widespread, they provide important insights into how environmental education can be strengthened. Some teachers described practices that included:

- asking students to share their experiences from home;
- using local examples in lessons;
- creating opportunities for discussion and reflection.

In these instances, teachers attempted to draw from what students already knew from their daily lives. When classroom learning was linked to these experiences, environmental topics became more relevant and meaningful for students. Pozang, a teacher from a rural school, explained, "if we ask students to talk about their experiences, they can relate better. Otherwise, it becomes just another topic to cover".

Other teachers similarly noted that when students are given space to reflect and share, they become more engaged and are able to make connections between school learning and their own lives. These moments, although limited, suggest that students are capable of deeper engagement when learning is structured in ways that value their experiences. These examples highlight the importance of combining:

- experience – what students already do and know;
- reflection – thinking about why it matters.

Students already have experiential and relational foundations. What is often missing is:

- structured opportunities to reflect;
- connections to broader knowledge;
- discussion of ethical and cultural meaning.

Classroom practice observation indicated that such reflective opportunities are not consistently built into lessons, often due to time constraints and the need to complete syllabus requirements. As a result, opportunities to connect experience with deeper understanding remain limited. When these elements are brought together, environmental learning becomes more meaningful and connected. It allows students to move beyond participation in activities toward developing a clearer understanding of responsibility, grounded in both their lived experiences and broader social and cultural meanings.

Discussion -

We argue that environmental responsibility in Bhutan is already well developed in students' everyday lives through forms of learning that are experiential, relational, and culturally grounded. Students participate in practices shaped by family expectations, community norms, and spiritual beliefs, and through these experiences, they develop an understanding of responsibility toward the environment that is meaningful and embedded in daily life. However, when these forms of learning enter school, they are often reshaped into textbook topics and

superficial activities like cleaning up litter. Environmental learning becomes procedural, focused on tasks and expectations, rather than on meaning, reflection, and connection. The central challenge is not whether environmental responsibility is taught, but how it is framed, and whether it builds on or disconnects from what students already know and do.

A key implication of DorjiW's (2025) research is that environmental education in schools be less oriented around superficial activities. Clean-up programmes, planting, and participation in Green School initiatives are important and should be recognised as valuable elements of school life. However, when these activities are not accompanied by discussion, reflection, and connection to broader meanings, they risk becoming procedural and superficial. Students learn what to do, but may not fully understand why these actions matter, how they relate to cultural values, or how they connect to environmental challenges beyond the school context. In this sense, the issue is not the presence of activity-based learning, but the absence of sustained opportunities for meaning-making.

The discontinuation of social studies and the implementation of the 'Cambridge' model, alongside a stronger emphasis on STEM subjects, signal a shift in how knowledge is organised within the curriculum. The Cambridge approach might facilitate clearer progression, stronger disciplinary knowledge, and alignment with international standards. We suggest, however, that the Cambridge model may decrease opportunities for cross-curricular integration. And when environmental education is distributed across subjects without a clear integrative and cross-disciplinary space, it can become fragmented. Without a cross-disciplinary framework learning about the environment risks becoming atomistic. Environmental citizenship is then reduced to separate pieces of knowledge and activity, rather than developed as a connected and meaningful practice.

This highlights the distinctive value that social studies previously offered within the Bhutanese curriculum. As cross-disciplinary subject, social studies potentially provided space for students to connect environmental knowledge with cultural practices, ethical reasoning, and civic responsibility. In this sense, social studies created opportunities for experiential and relational learning to be extended through reflection and discussion. Without such a curricular space, there is a risk that environmental education becomes dominated by disciplinary perspectives, particularly scientific ones, which are essential but not sufficient on their own. Science can explain environmental systems and processes, but it does not necessarily address questions of meaning, responsibility, and cultural understanding. These dimensions are central to environmental citizenship.

We suggest that the challenge for Bhutanese education is not whether environmental citizenship can be included within a Cambridge or STEM-oriented curriculum, but how it is integrated. A challenge is to how to advance cross-disciplinary approaches. Teachers should be supported to explicitly connect learning across subjects, to draw on students' experiences, and to create space

for reflection and discussion. It also requires recognising that there is a rich tradition of spiritual ecology in Bhutan. Students and their parents could bring significant knowledge into the classroom, and that this home-grown knowledge can be used as a foundation for deeper learning. This does not require major structural changes, but rather a shift in pedagogy. In this way, routine activities can become opportunities for learning rather than simply tasks to be completed.

The middle years of schooling are particularly important in this regard. The findings show that students are already participating in environmental practices at this age, which means that education can focus on deepening and extending these understandings rather than introducing them from the beginning. When learning builds on what students already experience, it is more likely to be meaningful and sustained. This reinforces the importance of ensuring that curriculum structures and pedagogical approaches support cross-disciplinarity rather than fragmentation.

Let us conclude by drawing attention again to the internationally respected frameworks of Bhutan's GNH policies. While the ethos of GNH is being enacted at a high-order level, it is not being enacted to its full potential in Bhutan's schools. As Bhutan continues to engage with international models such as Cambridge and to strengthen STEM education, there is a need to ensure that environmental citizenship does not become further reduced to fragmented knowledge and procedural activity. Instead, it should remain connected to the experiential, relational, and cultural foundations that are already present in Bhutanese society. Reconsidering how curriculum space is created for cross-disciplinary learning, whether through subjects such as social studies or other approaches, will be critical for supporting meaningful environmental citizenship in the future.

Conclusion

Building on DorjiW's doctoral research, we argue that environmental responsibility in Bhutan is already deeply embedded in everyday life, where children learn spiritual ecology through participation, relationships, and cultural meanings. However, schools in Bhutan have not yet found ways to build connections between textbook knowledge and this home-grown, spiritual ecology knowledge. This gap between Bhutan's rich spiritual ecology and formal school curriculum highlights an important challenge for environmental education. The findings suggest that meaningful environmental citizenship requires more than superficial participation in activities. It depends on connecting experience with reflection, enabling students to understand why their actions matter and how they relate to broader social and cultural contexts. In this regard, social studies offers a cross-disciplinary space for integrating knowledge, values, and responsibility. At a time when its role in primary education is being reconsidered, DorjiW's (2025) research raises important questions about how such integrative learning will be sustained. Strengthening this space is essential for developing meaningful and contextually grounded environmental citizenship.

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