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# Towards an Inclusive Education Policy for Sustainability: Advancing the 'Educating for Gross National Happiness' Initiative in Bhutan

Phuntsho Wangdi \* and Piyapong Boossabong 

School of Public Policy, Chiang Mai University, Chiang Mai 50100, Thailand; piyapong.b@cmu.ac.th

\* Correspondence: phuntsho\_w@cmu.ac.th or phuntsho.phuntsho@yahoo.com

**Abstract:** Education policies are often critiqued for short-sightedness and increasingly contended for their unsustainability. In the face of a bipolar characterisation of educational goals for economic utilitarianism and humanism with spiritual gratification, this study examines Bhutan's Educating for Gross National Happiness (EGNH) as a policy tool. Aiming to understand whether EGNH is an inclusive, holistic, and sustainable policy instrument, this study pivots on coalesced methodological approaches of deliberative policy analysis, documentary policy reviews, and comparative policy analysis. The research design included examining the effectiveness and sustainability of the EGNH initiative through the lens of policy design. The main findings reveal that external and internal factors such as foreign policy influences, inconsistent internal policy interventions, interferences by party politics, weak policy coherence, and a lack of a comprehensive policy framework are the principal reasons for unsustainable policy gaps. This study offers valuable insights with a proposal for a comprehensive and dynamic framework to shape the future of education in the spirit of sustainability.

**Keywords:** globalisation; educating for gross national happiness; spiritualism; materialism; education policy; policy design



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## 1. Introduction

The foundation of every society's growth is hinged upon the quality of its education system since it is an essential tool to break the cycle of poverty, disadvantage, and disempowerment. International education conventions and policies are directed towards ensuring equitable access to quality education. For example, the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights promulgate the universal entitlement to education without distinction of race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth, or other status. The global efforts through the Education for All Initiative (EAI) of 1990; the Dakar Declaration of 2000, the Millennium Development Goals of 2000, and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development of 2015 call for a universal provision of accessible and equitable education to promote social welfare, wellbeing and justice [1]. However, globalisation, population growth, transnational migration, climate change, humanitarian crises, wars, and pandemics have catapulted challenges in the delivery of educational services. As the technological and economic revolution gathers pace, education reformations globally focus on finding alternative and sustainable futures based on social welfare and wellbeing [2]. Governments are cognizant of education to respond appropriately to the future by empowering individuals based on multi-faceted dimensions of the existential and experiential human conditions [3]. Although early education systems were mostly oriental with their fundamental role benchmarked as a social equaliser, the education systems now confront cultural changes as the policymakers emphasise a mechanistic model to raise life skills for workforce productivity and outshine humanistic policies [4,5].

The teachings of Buddhism, principally the Mahayana tradition following the middle-path approach to life, have strongly influenced the education policies of Bhutan. The principles of balancing economic development (*peljor gongphel*) with happiness (*gakid*) and peace (*dewa*) have a strong effect on public policymaking [6]. Aligned with it is the development philosophy of Gross National Happiness (GNH) that serves as a principal policy tool to foster mental and physical wellbeing in a supportive environment of interdependence and inclusivity. As an extension of operationalising GNH in the education sector, Educating for Gross National Happiness (EGNH) was introduced in 2010 to provide a balanced education with its utilitarianism and humanistic values [7]. While implementing the EGNH initiative, the focus of the academic literature primarily revolved around the pedagogical and administrative aspects, rather than cogitating it through the policy angle for sustainability. This paper examines the gaps in implementing the EGNH initiative in Bhutan from a policy design perspective and proposes a comprehensive and practical education framework that promotes inclusivity and sustainability of education across all systems.

What follows is a brief background on the Gross National Happiness (GNH) and Educating for Gross National Happiness (EGNH) initiative in Bhutan. The development philosophy of Gross National Happiness (GNH) can be traced back to the 1970s when the Fourth King, His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck, emphasised the significance of happiness in comparison to materialism. This shift occurred due to the realisation that the development model based solely on the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) had its limitations in promoting happiness and overall wellbeing. In contrast, GNH aims to address these deficiencies by providing alternative avenues for social welfare, communal relationships, mental wellbeing, and spirituality while also recognising the significance of material aspects of development. Therefore, GNH is considered a means to achieve a harmonious balance between spiritual and material dimensions of development. This balance is accomplished by the pursuit of four fundamental pillars of GNH: preserving the environment, safeguarding culture, promoting sustainable economic growth, and maintaining good governance [8].

The four pillars are further reinforced by nine domains which have been assigned weights to indicate equal importance. These domains, encompassing psychological wellbeing, time use, cultural diversity, ecological resilience, community vitality, good governance, education, health, and living standards, are designed to reflect the purposes of governance and the values of society in a broad sense. Additionally, these domains are further expanded into 33 indicators of GNH [9]. In recent years, GNH has gained significant global attention and recognition as a social policy tool for exploring alternative approaches to measuring modern development. This interest has been fuelled by the United Nations' endorsement of the Human Development Index in 1990, which prompted a worldwide exploration of comprehensive developmental measures that include social, emotional, and mental aspects. Also, the UN officially recognised happiness as a universal goal by declaring March 20 as International Happiness Day, starting in 2011 [10]. The Table 1 below shows the Gross National Happiness pillars, domains, and indicators.

To integrate GNH into the education system, the Ministry of Education introduced the Educating for Gross National Happiness (EGNH) programme in the school education (pre-primary to class 12) system in 2010. It was an outcome of an International Educators' Conference of 2009 held in Bhutan to achieve the wider social, cultural, and economic goals set for the country within the national vision [11]. The conference resolved to formulate and implement EGNH initiatives in schools across Bhutan by integrating GNH principles through curricular and pedagogical approaches and incorporating traditional and modern skills. The goal was to cultivate the physiological, psychological, and moral consciousness to nurture happy individuals in an ambience of happy schools. The strategy then, was to develop a 'GNH School or Green School' by developing environment greenery, intellectual greenery, academic greenery, social greenery, cultural greenery, spiritual greenery, aesthetic greenery, and moral greenery or dimensions of a human personality [12]. The eventual

goal of EGNH was to nurture young Bhutanese with the understanding of the interconnected nature of reality, interdependence with the natural world, and consciousness of compassionate considerations for all sentient beings [13]. The Ministry of Education aimed to achieve these goals by transforming schools through rigorous innovative practices on improving school leadership and management, fine-tuning curricular and pedagogical approaches in tune with GNH principles, developing the school's psycho-social ambience, and improving school-community relationships. Hence, the EGNH initiative was deemed relevant as it was viewed as a valuable framework. However, despite the nationwide efforts to establish a GNH-inspired education system, EGNH has continued to be an unsustainable symbolic gesture in policy documents [14]. While previous studies have examined EGNH practices from various perspectives such as curriculum, administration, and pedagogy, no research has explored it from a policy standpoint [15]. Addressing this gap, this study aims to evaluate EGNH initiatives to propel it towards the future of education in Bhutan and beyond. The emphasis on balancing worldly and spiritual values can also serve as a valuable lesson for other contexts.

**Table 1.** GNH indicators.

Pillars	Domains	Indicators
Socio-economic development	Living standards	Per capita income Assets Housing
	Health	Self-reported health Healthy days Disability Mental health
	Education	Knowledge Literacy Schooling Values
Conservation of environment	Ecological diversity and resilience	Responsibility towards environment Ecological issues Wildlife damage Urban issues
Protection and promotion of culture	Psychological wellbeing	Life satisfaction Positive emotions Negative emotions Spirituality
	Time-use	Work Sleep
	Community vitality	Donation (time and money) Safety Community relationship Family
	Cultural diversity and resilience	<i>Zorig Chusum</i> /13 Artistic skills of Bhutan Cultural participation Speak native language <i>Driglam Namzha</i> /social etiquette of Bhutan
Good governance	Good governance	Fundamental rights Governance performance Political participation Services

## 2. General Research Methodology

Policies shape beliefs, behaviours, and institutions, and so policy design adds value by offering a practical framework with goals and instruments to appropriately sync with the contexts, processes, and outcomes [16]. Since policies need to be feasible, legal, and sustainable and their functionality lies in their ability to provide a comprehensive perspective on the causal relationships that influence their successes or failures, a holistic dynamic of economics, governance mechanisms, democratic approaches, and developmental philosophies need to be considered when proposing alternatives [17]. This is also because policy design significantly depends on socio-cultural, economic, organisational, and political contexts, and so, it is highly contextualised [18]. Hence, the policy design process is hinged on establishing legitimacy and efficacy through interactions among legislative, bureaucratic, and democratic dimensions [19]. Recognising its novelty, the study of policy design has gained momentum recently and explores improvement from non-design and less design to more design [20]. The work is now probing into an integrated, democratic, and holistic approach to enable systematic and comprehensive policies, spurring a pathway to the new era of policy studies [21]. Among various conceptualisations of policy design, this study adopts Guy Peters' policy design framework encompassing problem causation, instrumentation, intervention, and evaluation. Determining causation involves identifying the problems to be dealt with and setting goals. Peters emphasises that policies are influenced by numerous factors and circumstances such as social, economic, cultural, and political aspects that shape the need for particular policy intervention. Therefore, policymakers must carefully analyse these causal factors to identify the root causes of problems and develop practical solutions [22]. To ascertain the cause of the policy gaps, the following methods are adopted.

## 3. Deliberative Policy Analysis

Deliberative Policy Analysis (DPA) has emerged as an alternative to the mainstream technocratic empirical analytic methods to solve public policy problems and create platforms for policy arguments from a broader spectrum of citizens, politicians, and experts in the pursuit of policy decisions that are both effective and democratically legitimate. In the absence of sufficient empirical references for Bhutan's context, the deliberative policy analysis method was used to understand the causations of the policy dilemma. In this case, 51 participants were involved in the deliberative processes using a purposive sampling approach by combining maximum variation sampling, also called heterogeneous sampling, and expert sampling to capture the broadest range of perspectives possible. This was realized to enable the causation of policy gaps to be viewed from different angles to identify common patterns across variations. Expert sampling was used since the research required individuals with a high level of knowledge about a particular subject. The experts comprising principals, teachers, and curriculum developers were selected based on demonstrable skill sets and professional experiences so that the investigation complements the observational and exploratory evidence.

Participants with different backgrounds such as policymakers, policy implementers, and benefactors were engaged in the deliberation. With the policymakers such as chiefs of divisions under the Ministry of Education, education specialists, and district education officers, focus group discussions were conducted. Structured interviews were conducted with the policy implementers such as school principals and teachers. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the policy benefactors such as parents and students, and in-depth interviews were conducted with key informants such as the minister and directors to facilitate communicative exchanges by promoting consensus building, mutual understanding, or acknowledging differences [23].

## 4. Sampling

A purpose sampling was conducted since this approach best met the requirements for participant variation to represent various stakeholder groups. The study participants were classified under the following four tiers:

Tier I: This tier consisted of policymakers including chiefs of divisions and district education officers (DEO) who were professionals involved in formulating and ensuring its execution. This study included representatives from all 20 districts of Bhutan to ensure regional representation.

Tier II: The participants in this tier consisted of field policy implementers such as school principals and teachers. Under the country's administrative division, two schools were selected from each of the eastern, western, northern, and southern regions. Additionally, principals, teachers, and students from special schools were included in the interviews. The teachers' gender and regional representation were also considered by providing platforms for two male and female teachers from each school to participate in the interviews. To derive valuable insights, experienced teachers with a minimum of three years of teaching experience and proven career track records were invited for the interview.

Tier III: This tier featured representation from the education policy benefactors, particularly, parents and students from mainstream and special needs schools. Students with a gender balance of one male and one female were chosen from secondary schools in districts covering the administratively divided regions of the country. The students from senior secondary schools were identified as participants for the semi-structured interviews to derive meaningful responses since this study involved policy matters. This tier also consisted of randomly selected parents from varying socio-economic backgrounds, and citizenship status and whose children were school-going were invited to avail authentic and up-to-date opinions.

Tier IV: This tier comprised policy and decision makers such as the minister, directors, and education specialists to respond to in-depth interview questions. These key informants represented some cardinal educational agencies from the policy and planning, curriculum, assessment, and education programmes. The Table 2 below indicates the sampling process with the methods, respondents, and agencies of the participants.

**Table 2.** Participants and methods for this study.

Tier	Method	Participants	Participants	Organisation
I. Policy Makers	Focus group discussions	Chief of Divisions	3	Ministry of Education (MoE)
		Education Specialist	3	Departments under MoE
		District Education Officer	6	Districts
II. Policy implementers	Structured interviews	School Principals	6	Mainstream Schools
			4	Special Needs school
		Teachers	6	Mainstream Schools
			6	Special Needs school
III. Policy benefactors	Semi-structured interviews	Parents	6	
		Students	4	Mainstream Schools
IV. Key-informants	In-depth interviews	Minister	1	Ministry of Education
		Directors	2	
		Specialists	1	
Total			51	

## 5. Documentary Reviews

This study primarily employed qualitative research methods, including cross-sectional analytical quantitative analysis and descriptive qualitative analysis. Therefore, documentary analysis and literature reviews were significant starting points for this study particularly to gauge the instrumentation component of the policy design. Instrumentation involves the selection of appropriate instruments and resources, such as authority, administrative structures, rules, and procedures [24]. The government policy documents and guidelines articulate the education vision, mission, goals, objectives, and implementation strategies for Bhutan. Thus, government documents, including 34 editions of the Education Policy Guidelines and Instructions (EPGIs) from 1988 to 2020, the Bhutan 2020 Vision document, the Bhutan Education Blueprint 2014, the draft National Education Policy 2018, and the Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan 2008, Training Manual for Educating for Gross National Happiness and Bhutan Baccalaureate Learning Framework were used for this study.

## 6. Comparative Policy Analysis

The comparative policy analysis method was used to analyse policy interventions and evaluation. Intervention allows policymakers to address underlying causes rather than merely treating symptoms or surface-level issues by intervening at critical points in a problem's chain of events to create a meaningful impact [25,26]. Evaluation provides feedback loops that enable policymakers to learn from experiences, make necessary adjustments if required, and improve future policymaking processes. It reflects whether the overall design process effectively addresses identified problems and includes valuing the intended and unintended policy outcomes and impacts. Since the education policies of Finland, Singapore, and Australia are known for being dynamic to meet their local needs while performing well in the global educational rankings, the education policies of those countries were referred to [27–29]. While each country has unique and different policy approaches suited for their contexts, those systems share certain commonalities that resonate as a cutting-edge policy paradigm to benefit the respective country's socio-economic developments. Furthermore, Bhutan's educational organisations engage in institutional collaborations, making it realistic to delve into the education policies of these countries to foster cross-country comparisons, leading to an enhanced understanding and learning of various intervention and evaluation strategies. The following Table 3 shows the theoretical and methodological strategies for this study.

**Table 3.** Theoretical framework and methodology.

Policy Design Angles	Methodological Strategies	Target Respondents	
Causation analysis	Deliberative policy analysis	Focus group discussions	Chiefs of Divisions. District education officers.
		Structured Interviews	Principals. Teachers.
		Semi-structured interviews	Parents. Students.
		In-depth interviews	Decision makers (Minister Director General, Director Education Specialists).

Table 3. Cont.

Policy Design Angles	Methodological Strategies	Target Respondents
Instrument selection	Documentary research	Education Policy Guidelines and Instructions (EPGIs) from 1988 to 2020. Bhutan 2020 Vision document. Bhutan Education Blueprint. National Education Policy (Draft). Bhutan Baccalaureate Learning Framework. Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan.
Strategic interventions	Comparative policy analysis	Education Policy documents of Finland, Singapore, and Australia.
Evaluation mechanisms		

## 7. Data Analysis

Prior consent from the participants was obtained before conducting the interviews and audio recordings of the interviews and focus group discussions were obtained. Additionally, notes were taken during the interviews. The recorded audios were then transcribed, and a manual content analysis of the transcripts was conducted using the policy design conceptual framework to mainly explore the factors and conditions present in the policy design. A thematic analysis of causation, instruments, intervention, and evaluation strategies within the policy design was realized. To minimise bias in the analysis, a second investigator was involved in reviewing the transcripts. Any differences between the two investigators' interpretations were resolved through discussion.

## 8. Ethical Considerations

This study has ensured that the research protocols of the Chiang Mai University Research Ethics were strictly observed. Even as societies were recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic, this study maintained strict COVID protocols by monitoring the situation in the study site and following preventive measures to ensure safety during the interviews and focus group discussions. Prior approvals and mutually convenient appointments were sought for site visits such as schools and offices. A blanket approval for this study was also availed from the Ministry of Education. The study participants were informed about this study via a participant information sheet and informed consent forms to ensure strict ethical measures during this study. The venue and dates for the deliberative analysis were chosen via mutual discussions. This study also ensured the protection of data privacy, confidentiality of the identities and information of the informants, and the data in general.

## 9. Study Limitations

The scope of this study was to explore the educational dimensions of striking a balance between conventional and contemporary values in education policies. As a vast and complex subject, other issues of equal educational relevance and importance could have been potentially missed. Also, in the process of an amalgamated study design, although attempts were made to rope in as many policy stakeholders and the relevant literature, it was not possible to accommodate all educational philosophies, ideologies, and interest groups. Additionally, in the absence of adequate studies about EGNH through the policy lens, the documentary analysis had to rely on the best available resources from the archives of the Ministry of Education. Notwithstanding hosts of education systems that are also regarded exemplary in their policies, systems, and processes, the education documents of Finland, Singapore, and Australia, were chosen for the comparative analysis solely based on Bhutan's educational alliances. Despite making every effort to conduct this study academically and comprehensively, there could potentially be theoretical and methodological limitations in this research.

## 10. Results

Aligned with the thematic analysis employing theoretical approaches of policy design, specifically about causation, instrumentation, intervention, and evaluation strategies, this section is divided into two parts. Firstly, it presents the findings derived from the methodological approaches of deliberative, documentary, and comparative policy analyses. The responses from the focus group discussions and interviews are presented as findings in the deliberative analysis segment. Similarly, the findings from the literature reviews of education policy documents are presented as findings in the documentary and comparative analysis segment. The following section then discusses the constraints and inadequacies of the EGNH initiatives and proposes a comprehensive framework to direct a sustainable future for education in Bhutan and beyond.

### 10.1. Findings from the Deliberative Analysis of Causation

When investigating the causes for the implementation dip in EGNH practices, the deliberative process identified globalisation as one of the primary reasons. Increased connectivity, integration and interactions at the people, policy, and practice levels have inclined people's beliefs, values, and attitudes towards neoliberal governmentality [30]. In Bhutan's case too, the expanding engagements with international development partners and donors have substantially influenced the incorporation of foreign ideologies in the education policies and practices. During a focus group discussion, the District Education Officer (DEO) 1 elucidated that the support from international agencies mainly UNICEF and the World Bank has enhanced inter-agency collaborations at the policy level. Echoing this statement, the DEO 2 stated that education curricular policies had strong influences from Bhutan's interactions with Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom, and India. This is attributed to drawing global policy practices which gradually caused a decline of emphasis on local cultural ethos and spiritual consciousness [31]. The influences of the New Public Management (NPM) paradigm founded on the principles of results, outcomes, and performance have transformed education into a business-like enterprise hinged upon efficiencies, effectiveness, and productivity [32,33]. School Principal 1 stated that the system-wide adoption of results-based, outcome-based, and competency-based education has restrained character-building education. School Principal 4 also pointed out that the introduction of a performance-based education system bred a competitive environment of meritocracy. The deliberation also identified teachers' woes in infusing GNH values into classroom teaching being restricted by curricular policies. Teacher 13 during the interview stated that infusion of EGNH values into every subject was not feasible because of the rigidity of the nationally prescribed curriculum which hinders pedagogical autonomy of teachers.

The trend of an internationalisation of education governance through the global education benchmarking system has proven to be concerning to the implementation of EGNH [34]. During an interview, Teacher 6 pointed towards Bhutan's participation in the Programme for International Student Assessment for Developing Countries (PISA-D) in 2019 as confrontational with a dismal and demoralising outcome. Teacher 8 reiterated that participation in the PISA-D provoked an education system for a market economy which contrasted with the goals of EGNH initiatives. School Principal 5 also highlighted that the global ranking systems characterised competition, stratification, and individualism and threatened the social-democratic principles of education as a public good central to civil society. During the interview, Teacher 1 pointed out that an increasingly globalised logic of education underpinned by the pressure to be globally competitive in a dynamic knowledge-based economy transpired into the promotion of elitism in Bhutan. The introduction of the internet in 1999 and the establishment of digital media are also attributable to the slowing down of EGNH implementation. Students in the interviews indicated that the ability to access digital devices and the internet is a crucial source for generating foreign knowledge and exposure. Student 4 recognised the internet as a significant contributor to their exposure to foreign cultures and learning, whereas Student 9 opined those students having access to the internet copied foreign cultures and appeared more modern and

sophisticated. School Principal 7 reinforced that the introduction of the internet and its subsequent exposure through the digital medium have exposed the country's children to foreign influences that also contributed to the deterioration of local value systems.

### 10.2. Findings from Documentary Reviews on Instrument Selection

Bhutan witnessed the commencement of an organised public administration with the arrival of Tibetan Lama Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal in 1616. The system of *Choedtsid*, which comprised dual governance of temporal and religious affairs, was introduced by Zhabdrung and practised until the establishment of a hereditary monarchy in 1907. In 2008, Bhutan transitioned from a monarchy to a democratic constitutional monarchy in a remarkable peaceful change in governance. It is noteworthy that the documentary reviews revealed that education policies were predominantly consistent during the period of the monarchy. The policy statements through government executive orders and education guidelines were primarily focused on welfare and values-based education with an emphasis on balancing conventional and contemporary education practices [35]. For example, the Fourth King, His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck, continually underscored the fundamental role of mindfulness education by emphasising the values of *sem dagzin thabni* (taming one's own mind), *sem dingdi zoni* (train to be strong-hearted), and *sem gochoep zoni* (to nurture positive mind). Additionally, the Constitution entrusts the State with the task of providing free education to impart knowledge, values, and skills to optimise the human potential of the entire population [36]. The Bhutan Vision 2020 document emphasises a comprehensive concept of education that instils awareness of the nation's distinctive cultural heritage, ethical values, and universal values that enhance the capacity of young people. This necessitates an educational system that nurtures citizens to be intellectually sharp, physically proactive, emotionally mindful, and morally upright [37]. The Bhutan Education Blueprint envisions the creation of an 'educated and enlightened society of GNH' founded and sustained on the unique Bhutanese values of *tha damtsig ley ju drey*, which denotes a sacred commitment and the causes and consequences of karmic actions [38]. This entrusts the education sector with the responsibility to provide a quality education that combines both modern and traditional values. In recent times, His Majesty, King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, reiterated the education system to instil a strong conviction and sense about the country's history, culture, tradition, and values. The King called for education reforms to ensure that the younger generations receive the best education rooted in local and global perspectives with national and transnational competencies [39]. The national aspirations elucidate the importance of developing a dynamic, robust, and progressive education system that meets the national goals and objectives and scales up educational performances comparable to international standards.

From the documentary reviews, it is worth noting that the Educating for Gross National Happiness (EGNH) initiative was a critical instrument to fulfil these aspirations. EGNH was designed to be implemented by following its five pathways of meditation and mind training, GNH curriculum, broader learning environment, media literacy, and holistic assessment [40]. However, the EGNH pathways had limitations imposed by the rigidity of the centrally prescribed curriculum, weak collaboration between the teacher training institutions and school education administrators, inconsistencies of professional development communities, and a puny research culture to study its impacts and progress. It was also observed that EGNH received criticism for its limitations in teaching science and vocational subjects, as teachers found it challenging to incorporate GNH values into these subjects or in all subjects [41]. Another factor that hindered the implementation of EGNH was a lack of adequate pedagogical and resource support. Additionally, the practice of EGNH faced limitations in effectively assessing these values, as educators and assessors lacked the knowledge and skills required to assess soft skills or subjective components. Although initially presented as a crucial tool for delivering a comprehensive education, EGNH was also influenced by the manipulation of political parties [42]. The introduction of parliamentary democracy ushered in a phase of policy inconsistencies as parties driven

by political motivations crafted their manifestos to cater to popular agendas. Specifically, the documentary reviews indicate that the issues of policy inconsistency stemmed from successive governments' prioritising political mileage. For instance, the first Druk Phuensum Tshogpa (DPT) government from 2008 to 2013 introduced the Educating for Gross National Happiness (EGNH) programme as a national initiative. Then the People's Democratic Party (PDP) government from 2013 to 2018 concentrated on the school reorganisation programme by developing central and autonomous schools. The Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa (DNT) government from 2018 to 2023 further embarked on a reform agenda by changing the basic education from class X to XII, reviewing central and autonomous schools and piloting the introduction of the Bhutan Baccalaureate (BB) programmes. This suggests a constant shift in the education policy objectives and activities with each change in government at every election cycle. It can be surmised that while the practice of EGNH still exists in some form, it is not institutionalised for want of its practicality, comprehensiveness and inclusiveness as a policy instrument.

### *10.3. Findings from Comparative Analysis on Intervention and Evaluation Strategies*

From the comparative angle, the intervention and evaluation methods employed in Finland, Singapore, and Australia reveal a diversity suited to their contexts. Although a structured framework with autonomy, flexibility, and decentralised management and monitoring mechanisms bolstered by an inclusive policy are their common features, the analysis indicates that their educational framework also requires more conceptual work to articulate comprehensiveness [43,44]. For instance, the Finnish education system has a well-defined educational philosophy to promote equity and the wellbeing of children. Finnish education focuses on providing a holistic school experience through a welfare-centric education system. Innovatively, the Finnish education policy implements a trust-based decentralised system that minimises monitoring, testing, and inspections. Therefore, it is safe to say that Finnish education is largely guided by equity-based educational policies. Conversely, Singaporean education policy interventions are primarily driven by a pragmatic orientation to build a knowledge-based society founded on meritocracy, competitiveness, and competency. The country has a centrally designed curriculum that incorporates a streaming and subject matter banding system, which directs students to specific courses based on their learning abilities [45]. Thus, it can be argued that Singapore's educational goals focus on attaining new economic competencies through creativity, innovation, and competition, with a strong impetus on meritocracy [46]. The Australian education system underscores instilling a strong work ethic and a sense of responsibility, discipline, and efficiency. Its education policies are designed to achieve equity and excellence, with a recurring importance on economic, educational, and technological advancements. These policies are underpinned by the human capital theory, which aims at economic reform and higher productivity in the global knowledge economy. Accordingly, the Australian education policies align with the principles of market-based neoliberalism that govern the global regime [47].

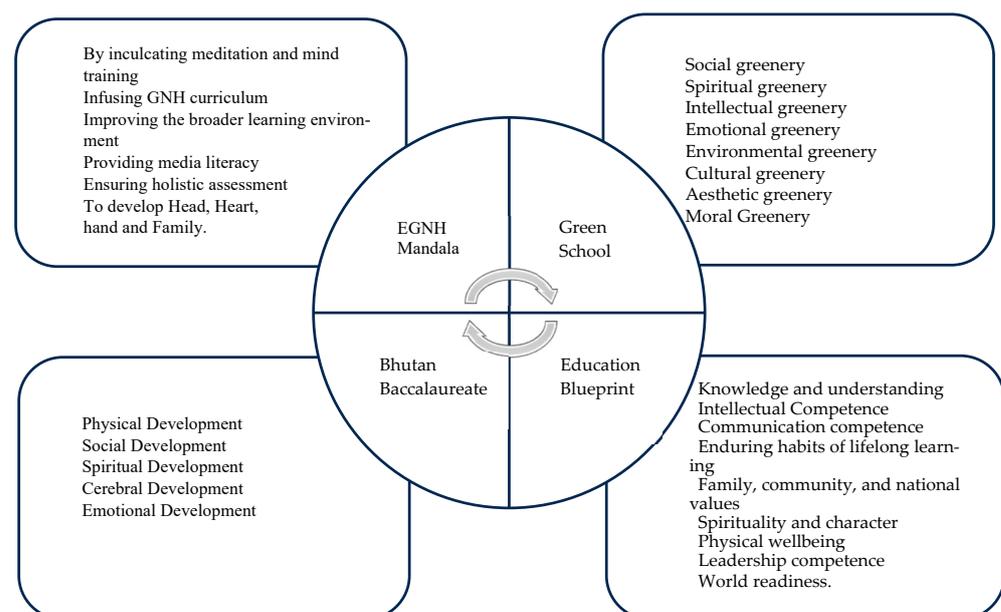
## **11. Discussion**

The transformative nature of education has its policies pegged as central to national development. However, the policies are subjected to consistent criticisms and reviews due to the inherent complexities associated with them in the public sphere. One of the key policy paradoxes in education is the need to strike a balance between traditional and modern values. This discourse is an emerging yet dominant theme driven by the changing dynamics of the socio-cultural, geo-political, and environmental milieu. As countries adjust their national priorities and seek to redefine their policies, many old policies have become obsolete, irrelevant, and unsustainable. Moreover, globalisation and neoliberalism have significantly influenced the formation of values and identities, often manifested through reforms in education policies. In recent years, numerous countries, particularly developing countries, have been redefining their educational roadmap by incorporating an equilibrium between

spiritual and material goals. As a new policy outlook to achieve a futuristic education paradigm that reinforces nationalism while embracing modernism is gaining momentum, critically analysing the policy design process and effectively implementing strategies that balance different goals will be a way forward for the future. Notwithstanding the importance of acknowledging that this area of study is still in its infancy and holds promising opportunities for exploration, research in this field recommends an inclusive education policy design in the spirit of inclusiveness, comprehensiveness, and sustainability.

An effective policy has coherence, consistency, and congruence between its goals and the means to achieve the desired outcomes. This means that the relationship between policy design and implementation tools must be theoretically meaningful and practically impactful. Scholars have referred to this phenomenon as the application and operationalisation of the field's theoretical and practical perspectives [48,49]. In this case, we aimed to combine the theoretical perspectives of policy design with methodological approaches to derive a comprehensive understanding of the EGNH in Bhutan. In doing so, we discovered that deliberative policy analysis works well in analysing causation and identifying challenges. For instance, through the process of deliberation, it becomes clear that external influences such as globalisation, the adoption of the new public management paradigm, the internationalisation of education benchmarking systems, and the absence of a comprehensive and inclusive policy framework serve as limiting factors for implementing EGNH. However, the deliberative process has limitations in identifying instruments, interventions and evaluating mechanisms because of the participants' lack of knowledge of the subject matter.

Contrarily, it has been observed that the available policy documents have served as a valuable source of information for identifying the policy instruments. The literature reviews have highlighted striking a balance between educational goals for the utilitarian purpose of the economy and fostering humanism as a consistent national priority of Bhutan [50]. For example, our investigation revealed that the education policies of 1974 and 1984, the Bhutan 2020 Document of 1999, the Constitution of 2008, the Training Manual for Educating for Gross National Happiness of 2009, the Bhutan Education Blueprint of 2014, the National Education Policy (Draft) of 2018, and the Bhutan Baccalaureate Learning Framework aimed at harmonising the ideals of spiritualism and materialism. The Figure 1 below demonstrates common aspirations for the education system in Bhutan as projected in various policy documents.



**Figure 1.** Education aspirations of Bhutan from multiple policy documents. Source: (RGOB, 2009; Powdyel, 2009; MoE, 2014 and DGI, 2024).

The figure above portrays how educational aspirations are shown separately in different documents thereby lacking policy cohesion. For example, the EGNH pathways include meditation and mind training, integrating the GNH curriculum, improving the overall learning environment, promoting media literacy, and ensuring holistic assessment. The concept of Green School for Green Bhutan spells eight dimensions of learning and human development which finds resonance in the nine student attributes of the Bhutan Education Blueprint and the learning framework of the Bhutan Baccalaureate Learning Framework. However, they fail to create a comprehensive educational environment since they lack the necessary instruments, interventions, and evaluation perspectives. This restricts their effectiveness in providing a framework that brings all existing policies together to promote mutual policy relevance and coherence [51]. Although there are ample correlations between those frameworks and pathways, it is not necessarily synergised to make it comprehensive to effectively guide the policymakers, scholars and educators [52,53]. This has resulted in the formulation of separate implementation mechanisms and strategies. Thus, the documentary reviews have revealed that, despite the presence of numerous policy directives and statements, there is a lack of a comprehensive education framework that is inclusive and holistic. This study has also discovered that documentary reviews were effective in understanding policy instruments for Bhutan's case. Notwithstanding other studies that have used this approach, such as [54], it had limitations in identifying strategic interventions and evaluation mechanisms since the policy documents of Bhutan did not project to have made a wide-ranging reference to global practices. With this gap, we resorted to comparative policy analysis to identify intervention and evaluation approaches. When comparing the educational policies of Finland, Singapore, and Australia, it becomes apparent that Finland focuses primarily on achieving educational fairness by implementing targeted policies to support marginalised and vulnerable groups in society. Conversely, Singapore's education policies aim to improve economic productivity through meritocracy [55]. Australia's education policy also seeks to achieve the neoliberal ideology of workplace efficiencies in a market economy. Although all three countries' education systems have earned global recognition, the comparative analysis reveals no one-size-fits-all approach to policy design and practices [56]. Instead, it is crucial to combine the best methods and practical approaches that consider the specific needs of each system to address real-world policy challenges effectively [57]. Due to the various factors contributing to achieving educational goals, it is crucial to establish a supportive, integrated, and inclusive educational policy that addresses current gaps in the school education system and serves as a roadmap for the sustainable future of education. Figure 2 below is our new proposal for a comprehensive EGNH framework that integrates national and global aspirations to shape the future and sustainability of education in Bhutan and beyond. We call it the *Sherig Kilkhor* or the Education Mandala.

The wheel above indicates that the central goal of education is to achieve Gross National Happiness (GNH), and, to achieve it, knowledge, values, skills, and family are essential pillars. We emphasise that 'family' is a critical pillar since it plays a significant role in providing enabling conditions to nurture children's physiological and psychological growth to fully develop a young individual's intellectual, emotional, and moral quotient.

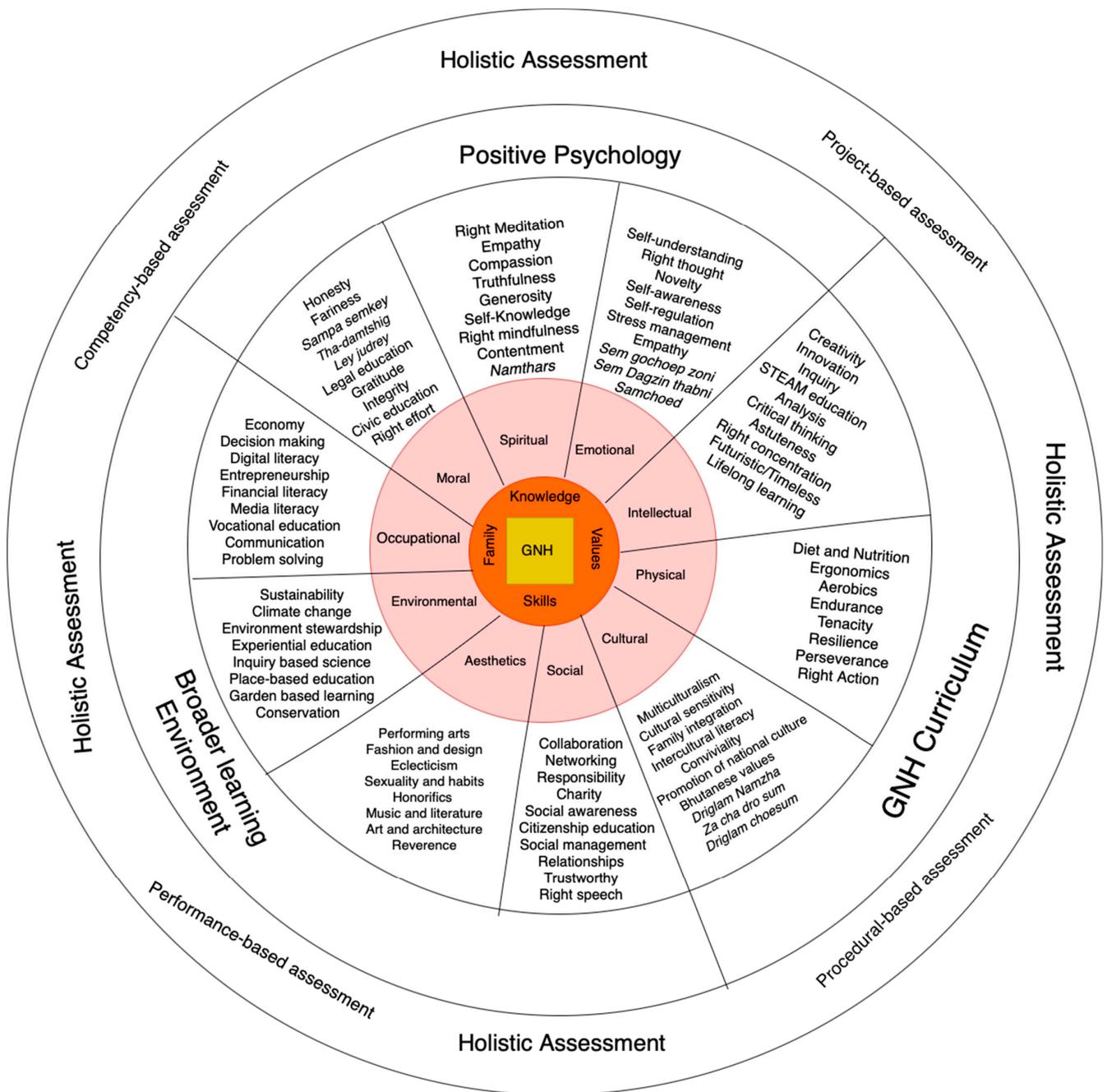


Figure 2. The Sherig Kilkhon for sustainable education. (Source: Developed by the authors).

The four pillars are reinforced by moral, spiritual, emotional, intellectual, physical, cultural, social, aesthetics, environmental, and occupational domains. We have added an ‘occupational’ domain for its explicit relevance in preparing school graduates for the world of work. To make the *Sherig Kilkhon* comprehensive, realistic, and feasible, key indicators are assigned for each of the domains. The indicators that are pegged against the domains are educational aspirations derived from Buddhist teachings, core life skills, the OECD learning framework, a 21st-century education model, various education policy documents of Bhutan, and global best practices to make it relevant, robust, and applicable for the need of the time [58]. For example, indicators such as collaboration, networking, responsibility, charity, social awareness, social management, relationships, trustworthiness, and right speech form the crux of the ‘social domain’. Likewise, indicators encompassing performing arts, fashion and design, eclecticism, sexuality and habits, honorifics, music and literature,

art and architecture, understanding subjectivity, and reverence comprise the 'aesthetics domain'. Sustainability, climate change, environment stewardship, experiential education, inquiry-based science, place-based education, garden-based learning, and conversation form the 'environmental domain'. The 'occupational domain' is composed of economy, decision-making skills, digital literacy, entrepreneurship, financial literacy, media literacy, vocational education, problem-solving skills, and communication skills. The 'moral domain' is composed of honesty, fairness, legal education, integrity, civic education, and right effort. We have also added the Bhutanese values of *Sampa semkey* (positive mind and right attitude) and *tha damtsig ley judrey* (sacred commitment and the causes and consequences of karmic actions) in this domain. The domain of 'spirituality' is formed by indicators encompassing right meditation, empathy, compassion, truthfulness, self-knowledge, right mindfulness, and contentment. The 'emotional domain' comprises self-understanding, right thought, novelty, self-awareness, self-regulation, stress management, and empathy. Additionally, the Bhutanese aspirations of *sem gochoep zoni* (nurturing positive mind), *sem dagzin thabni* (taming the mind) and *samchoed* (positive mind, attitude and aptitude) comprise this domain. The 'intellectual domain' is composed of creativity, innovation, STEAM education, critical thinking skills, analytical skills, astuteness, right concentration, and lifelong learning. The 'physical domain' features the indicators of diet and nutrition, ergonomics, aerobics, endurance, tenacity, resilience, perseverance, and right action. Finally, the 'cultural domain' is formed by indicators encompassing multiculturalism, cultural sensitivity, family integration, intercultural literacy and the promotion of national values. Recognising the novelty of the *Sherig Kilkhor* to guide the policymakers and scholars of Bhutan, we have added the values of *Driglam Namzha* (social etiquette), *Za cha dro sum* (mannerisms of eating, conducting and walking) and *Driglam Choesum* (etiquette, culture and spirituality) to promote some of the cardinal characteristics of its national values.

To effectively map into implementable strategies, the domains and indicators are further categorised into broader pathways. For example, the moral, spiritual, and emotional domains can be achieved through the pathways of positive psychology; the intellectual, physical, and social domains through GNH-based curriculum pathways; and finally, the social, environmental, aesthetics, and occupational domains can be achieved through the broader learning environment pathways. Eventually, the relevancy, effectiveness, and productivity of the EGNH pillars, domains, indicators, and pathways to achieve GNH are subjected to project-based, competency-based, performance-based, and procedural-based assessment systems to make it a holistic approach. With this proposal, it is anticipated that the *Sherig Kilkhor* or the Education Mandala will provide a comprehensive and inclusive framework to sustainably guide the future of education. It is also flexible and robust, allowing for the addition or removal of pillars, domains, indicators, pathways, and assessment models to suit different national contexts and systems. As a result, it is expected that this framework will ensure the sustainability of educational policies and practices through adaptations and adoptions that are appropriate for specific contexts and times [59].

### *Significance of This Study*

This study addresses knowledge gaps in the implementation of EGNH as a policy instrument and proposes a holistic policy framework to balance educational goals related to spiritualism and materialism. The COVID-19 pandemic has unexpectedly impacted the education system, forcing a shift from traditional methods to a more flexible approach to accommodate the needs of differently-abled learners. This transition has resulted in various challenges and widened educational disparities. It is crucial to develop a resilient education ecosystem to withstand any future anomalies. Thus, the study findings provide strategies, policy instruments, interventions, and evaluation mechanisms to ensure the continuity, efficiency, and sustainability of education. Furthermore, Bhutan's graduation from the category of Least Developed Country (LDC) has led to a different demand for knowledge and skills among its citizens. While the education system must equip individuals with economy-oriented abilities, it is equally important to promote human

values and social justice [60]. Therefore, this study's findings have significance in providing an implementation arm to the visions of His Majesty the Fifth King of Bhutan towards the path of the 21st century and offer insights for other education systems in balancing traditional and contemporary wisdom.

## 12. Conclusions

The current educational goals aim to instil traditional values in the young generation while embracing modern skills. This highlights the importance of including spiritualism and materialism in education policies. In the case of Bhutan, the EGNH initiative adopts the Buddhist Middle-Path approach. However, it lacks comprehensiveness and synchronisation of policy objectives and implementation strategies within and among the existing policy documents. This study advocates for the continuation of EGNH activities in school education systems through a proposed policy framework encompassing the core focus, pillars, domains, indicators, pathways, and assessment models for efficient implementation with an equal emphasis on balancing the educational goals of modernism and spiritualism. Additionally, this study aims to make a humble contribution to the theoretical angles of policy design by combining the methodological approaches of deliberative, documentary, and comparative analysis. The proposed *Sherig Kilkhor* or Education Mandala is expected to bring policy coherence to enhance EGNH initiatives in Bhutan and provide strategic guidance for the future of education. Furthermore, this study not only paves the way for educationists and policy scholars to delve deeper into this field but also allows for further exploration.

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