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Creating Conducive Learning Environments: An Action Research Study of School Principals in Trashigang, Bhutan

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Abstract

This action research explored how school principals in Trashigang district (Bhutan) cultivate conducive learning environments amidst systemic and contextual challenges. Guided by Kemmis & McTaggart's spiral model, 22 principals from diverse school levels participated in this study. The study employed open-ended online questionnaires and semi-structured interviews for data collection, facilitating reflective inquiry and participatory leadership. Interventions were co-constructed to address behaviour management, instructional approaches, well-being, and community involvement. The iterative cycles of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting enabled principals to collaboratively co-design locally rooted and contextually grounded responsive strategies such as restorative discipline, peer lesson observation, and parent-elder mentorship. These strategies improved student behaviour, academic engagement, teacher motivation, and community partnership. Despite infrastructural limitations, minimal parental involvement and participation, principals showed resilience, originality, and commitment to inclusive leadership.

Keywords: Spiral model, conducive, practice-based enquiry, journaling, reflective leadership

Introduction

School leadership is emphasised as an important driver of transformative change in education as underscored in Bhutan's Royal Kasho on Education Reform issued by His Majesty the King during the 113th National Day in 2020, together with the Bhutan Education Blueprint 2014–2024 (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2014). These visionary documents articulate a national aspiration– to develop an inclusive, future-ready education system where school leaders act as agents of innovation, pedagogical leadership, and systemic change. At the centre of this transformation agenda is the establishment of conducive learning environments.

Aligning with the recent national reforms, principals increasingly serve as instructional leaders and agents of transformation. However, to cultivate conducive learning environments in remote regions like Trashigang, principals encounter unique opportunities and challenges. To cater to the challenges in the ever-evolving realities of the twenty-first century, adaptive leadership is indispensable in any organisation (Singh et al., 2021). Studies have demonstrated a positive correlation between effective school leadership and positive school climate. However, challenges experienced by other countries are context-dependent and may not apply to culturally unique, remote places like Bhutan (Maxwell, 2003). In this context, there is an urgent need for localised, practice-based enquiry that addresses both challenges and circumstances that school leaders face in context dependent circumstances.

Literature Review

The review of literature explores the creation of conducive learning environments through principals' instructional leadership, and students' psychosocial well-being and behaviour management in schools in eastern Bhutan. Rooted in contextual realities of schools in Trashigang, the action research linked with collaborative analysis, adaptive interventions, and cyclical reflection serves as a critical factor for transformation. This research emphasises leadership as an agent for equity, resilience, and innovation in education through instructional, mental, and behavioural elements.

Instructional Leadership as a Transformative Practice

Beyond managerial approaches that promote accountability and outcomes-focused teaching and learning in Bhutan, Wangdi (2021) asserts that instructional leadership constitutes a vital dimension of leadership. In the Bhutanese context, reforms such as the Bhutan Education Blueprint (MoE, 2014) together with Royal Kasho on Education Reform have redefined the leadership roles of school principals. In this study, instructional leadership is considered not just a managerial function but also an inclusive improvement (Carrington et al., 2024; Maxwell, 2003). Similarly, Sliwka et al. (2024) assert that transformational leaders engage themselves in systemic analysis in addressing cultural challenges, including teachers' perceptions of collaborative professionalism and structural limitations, such as curriculum, assessment, and the use of time and space in schools. This study also examines principals' perceptions and practices of instructional leadership using reflective inquiry and dialogue within resource-constrained, contextually diverse educational settings in Trashigang. As a

part of intervention, it adopted collaborative planning, peer coaching, and learning circles focusing on instruction, assessment, and context-adapted curriculum (Eileen, 2020).

Psychosocial Well-being as a Foundation of Inclusivity

Developmental outcomes of children are influenced by the school environment (Rahmania, 2024). School environment enhances student engagement, emotional safety, and resilience. Bhutan's education policies, driven by Gross National Happiness, have resulted in programmes such as *Green Schools for Green Bhutan*, thereby fostering values like mindfulness, compassion, and holistic well-being (Young, 2012). However, the application of psychosocial dimensions differs significantly across schools in Bhutan. In Trashigang, for example, many primary schools lack access to professional counsellors and well-being coordinators. Therefore, this action research introduced cost-effective and contextual psychosocial interventions such as mentorship, reflective journaling, and emotional literacy programmes. Principals co-designed these micro-interventions and reflected collaboratively on the results, enabling the psychosocial domain to be influenced by context-responsive leadership (Paro College of Education [PCoE], 2008; Samtse College of Education [SCoE], 2017).

Behaviour Management: A Practice of Responsive Leadership

Student behaviour management is a critical dimension that allows leadership to have a tangible influence. In Bhutanese boarding schools, behaviour challenges are exacerbated by minimal parental engagement and a lack of adequate professional counsellors. While positive disciplining strategies are sporadically implemented, professional development in child behaviour remains negligible. To address this gap, this action research employed systematic reflective practice, involving principals in real-time observation, journaling, and solution-building. Restorative dialogues, flexible seating plans, and reward-based systems were piloted, documented, and discussed across the action cycles as a part of inclusive disciplinary approaches (Cochran-Smith et al., 2022).

Towards a Model of Conducive Learning Environments: Inclusion, Improvement, and Innovation

Although global studies provide valid findings, Bhutanese principals work in different cultural, systemic, and logistical realities that require context-related approaches. This action research used cyclical inquiry, collaborative reflection, and iterative innovation to develop contextually grounded practices (Hillon et al., 2017; Storen, 2024; Wolf, 2025). Aligned with principles of participatory and transformative action research, principals in Trashigang shouldered dual roles as co-researchers and participants. Participants engaged in continuous dialogue, tested interventions, and critically reflected on outcomes (Dahmen-Adkins, 2025; Smith, 2019). The study foregrounded indigenous percepts, evidence from practice, and ethical reflexivity.

Reimagining School Leadership through Action Research

This study fills a critical gap in the literature by integrating instructional leadership, psychosocial well-being, and behaviour management into a single, action-oriented framework (Maxwell, 2003; McNiff & Whitehead, 2006). By grounding the inquiry in Trashigang district and positioning principals as transformational agents, the research generated localised models of inclusive leadership that can be reproduced in other Bhutanese contexts. Ultimately, this work contributes to the democratisation of educational leadership research in Bhutan and improvement of school environments through indigenous knowledge and stakeholder involvement (PCoE, 2020).

This study adopted an action research process in which principals intervened to cultivate a conducive learning environment through iterative cycles of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. By utilising experiences and local school contexts, the study focused on Trashigang's school principals, emphasising their active engagement through reflective practice and participation guided by the constructivist paradigm. This research stressed adaptive leadership, reflection, and innovative interventions, including descriptive analyses of principal practices, to address evolving educational needs. Through this action-oriented discussion, the study acknowledges the transformative potential of principals' practices, not as fixed responses to top-down mandates, but as evolving and responsive strategies grounded in local realities. Through collaborative exploration and indigenous innovation (PCoE, 2020), it aligns with Bhutanese education transformation by encouraging bottom-up approaches.

Ultimately, it drives in-depth comprehension of how leadership can be utilised to cultivate conducive learning environments especially in rural Bhutanese schools. It contributes to constant development and inclusive action as critical component of educational transformation, thereby contributing to evolving body of knowledge that underscores values and practical insight (Sandoval Mena & Waitoller, 2025). This action research highlights emancipatory practice and collaborative practices as an avenue for transforming schools leading to equity, relevance, and innovation.

Furthermore, it explores the role of participatory action research cycles that determine principals' perspectives, reflective actions, and systemic challenges in culturally diverse, resource-constrained areas. This study also examines principals' challenges in inclusive school environment, which subsequently lead to the development of context-responsive approaches for rural educational environment.

Objective(s)

- i. Critically and collaboratively analyse the challenges faced by school principals in creating inclusive learning environments, considering cultural diversity and resource constraints.
- ii. Develop, implement and assess context-related inclusive interventions to address behavioural, psychological, and instructional challenges in rural schools.
- iii. Evaluate how participatory action research methodologies including iterative cycles of planning, execution, and reflection affect principals' leadership perspectives and enhance practices.

Reconnaissance: Situational Analysis

Principals in Bhutan function as institutional heads, responsible not only to oversee instructional activities but also for cultivating school culture. Additionally, they also serve as administrators, managing resource allocation and policy compliance (Wangdi, 2021). However, in remote areas like Trashigang, their leadership practices are often constrained by systemic challenges. Through action research (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006; PCoE, 2020), this study explored school leaders' innovation and intervention within their contexts to address structural barriers (Sandoval Mena & Waitoller, 2025; Maxwell, 2003). Despite Bhutan's robust educational commitment (MoE, 2014), principals in Trashigang face complex duties hindering instructional leadership. Therefore, this action research highlight how inclusion, improvement, enhancement, intervention, and innovation can lead to transformative change (Smith, 2019).

Principals focus on psychological, social, and academic success of students (Garan, 2022). However, owing to diverse and disadvantaged learners in remote settings, managing student behaviours prove to be challenging. Additionally, principals often lack formal training in behaviour management, conflict resolution, or restorative practices (Cochran-Smith et al., 2022). Additionally, the lack of adequate professional counsellors and minimal parental engagement, particularly in boarding schools, further deteriorate behavioural management and highlight the need for participatory changes (Dahmen-Adkins, 2025).

Another area that needs strategic improvement is the physical ambience of schools. Infrastructural challenges such as overcrowded classrooms, inadequate furniture, poor ventilation and pitiable sanitation influence both student engagement and teacher motivation (MoE, 2014). Although national efforts to upgrade infrastructure are in process, these efforts are uneven and delayed in remote districts like Trashigang due to budgetary and logistical challenges. Therefore, this action research enabled the principals to co-construct indigenous approaches aimed at optimising existing spaces, mobilising local resources, and influencing policy through evidence-based feedback systems (PCoE, 2008).

Principals implement national educational reforms, including competency-based curricula, continuous assessments, and value-driven education (MoE, 2020). However, discrepancies still exist between policy expectations and ground realities. Many schools lack proper ICT facilities, libraries, and laboratories, hindering the implementation of learner-centred pedagogy (SCoE, 2017). Additionally, the Ministry of Education and Skills Development (MoESD) initiatives such as the School Leadership Development Programme (SLDP) and the Nurturing Leadership Programme (NLP) exhibit limited impact on sustainable professional development due to insufficient follow-up. Through iterative action research cycles (Hillon et al., 2017), principals can document their professional journeys, reflect critically, and produce solutions guided by contexts (Young, 2012).

Competence

a) Researcher's Competence:

The researcher received training in action research methodology, emphasising problem diagnosis, stakeholder involvement, and value-focused intervention (MoE, 2020). During the action

research process, methodological competence was demonstrated through reflective dialogues and collaborative enquiry processes with school principals, which aligned with principles of participatory action research (Choeda et al., 2018; Maxwell, 2003; Young, 2012).

b) Research Participants' Competence:

Participants from the higher secondary, middle secondary, lower secondary, primary, and technical schools were willing to participate in the study. This approach currently aligns with the principles of action research, where participants not merely studied but equally participated as co-researchers in recognising challenges, evaluating strategies, and reflecting on outcomes (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006).

c) Critical Friend's Competence:

Mr. Kinga Tshering, the Education Monitoring Officer under the Education Monitoring Division, was a critical friend in this action research process. With over 10 years of experience in school leadership and classroom teaching, Mr. Tshering possessed pedagogical insight and institutional knowledge for the reflective dialogue. His role as a critical friend involved providing constructive critique, methodological support, and facilitating reflective practice, aligning with the participatory and democratic ideals of action research (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006).

Action Research Question

How can school principals in Trashigang collectively improve learning environments through inclusive leadership practices and context-related interventions?

Methodology

This action research employed qualitative online surveys with open-ended questions, followed by semi-structured interviews as reflective tools to foster critical inquiry, inclusivity, and participant-driven meaning-making. This design was appropriate for the district of Trashigang, where geographic limitations restrict in-person collaboration. The online platform facilitated an inclusive and accessible platform, allowing participation from various school settings. The open-ended format encouraged reflection, enabling school leaders to share lived experiences and devise indigenous, innovative practices for future intervention cycles.

Data Collection

The researcher, as an experienced principal in the Bhutanese education system, commenced the first phase of the study by gathering baseline data to focus on context-based school leadership practices in Trashigang. Data were collected employing open-ended online questionnaires followed by semi-structured interviews with 22 school principals from multi-level schools such as higher secondary, middle secondary, lower secondary, primary, and a technical institute via Zoom.

Participants

A total of 22 principals from schools and one technical institute across Trashigang district participated in the study. Participants accounted for approximately 48% of the district's total school leaders. These wide representations allowed a wide spectrum of contexts, capturing localised leadership experiences.

Research Instrument

The research instrument consisted of a 25-item, open-ended questionnaire developed to explore six critical thematic areas:

- i. Perceptions of enabling a conducive learning environment.
- ii. Prevailing practices in creating conducive learning environments in schools.
- iii. Management of student behaviour.
- iv. Management of the physical and psychosocial environment.
- v. Organisations of instructional activities.
- vi. Challenges encountered by principals.

The instrument was developed by the researcher in collaboration with the critical friend and was reviewed by two experienced school principals from Trashigang and one teacher educator from Paro College of Education. Their context-based knowledge and leadership experience led to validation of emerging themes, development of intervention strategies, and alignment of intervention with national education vision. A pilot test was conducted with two school heads to ensure the cultural and contextual relevance of the instrument. The instruments were administered through Google Forms.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed. According to Scharp and Sanders (2018), Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis consist of a repetitive process which includes six steps: gaining familiarity with the data, creating coding categories, producing themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and finding examples. Thematic analysis led the researcher to recognise patterns focusing on contextual challenges and existing strengths in leadership practices. These findings guided the design of a collaborative intervention that was examined in subsequent cycles of the action research process. The iterative nature, therefore, enabled principals to examine and refine their practices in response to context and shared reflection.

Ethical Considerations

This research adhered to all ethical standards, including ensuring participants' anonymity, confidentiality, and the voluntary nature. Findings were reported with attention and took care of participants' confidentiality. Beyond procedural ethics, the study also included indigenous Bhutanese values such as collaboration, humility, and mutual respect. The research functioned as a collaborative

process of growth, not evaluation. To enable recognition, ownership, and future action, data was shared transparently.

Participants' Attitude

Principals, as reflective practitioners, were willing to openly discuss topics such as challenges in student discipline, limited parental support, and resource constraints. Their readiness to share not only reflected emotional intelligence but also emphasized a culture of reflective leadership. Participants' narratives demonstrated a mindset of continuous improvement rather than defensive justifications, showing an emerging ecosystem of adaptive and responsive leadership.

Their knowledge was grounded in Bhutanese values of community, collaboration, and holistic development, while also encompassing self-reflection. Principals discussed ways to address systemic constraints using innovative, contextually related approaches, including producing value-based interventions, collaborating with local leaders, and embracing cultural values. One principal insightfully remarked, "We may not have everything, but that does not stop us from creating meaningful experiences for our children". These insights reflect moral leadership and a sense of ownership.

Moreover, through this research platform, principals advocated for inclusive and systemic transformation. Their reflective critique, ranging from obsolete infrastructures to administrative constraints, was not an expression of pessimism, but of hope. They recommended improvements to influence policy and actions beyond their schools, and at the national level, their perceptions illustrated a reflective and collaborative mindset, thereby exemplifying school-level leadership.

Emerging data revealed that professional teamwork and transformative leadership were cultivated by a peer learning culture and interschool mentoring across schools. The study also showed that principals can be co-learners, change agents, and knowledge designers. Their perspectives, together with reflective practice, constitute a critical approach often overlooked in top-down educational transformation. This study highlights the transformative potential of school-based action research in the Bhutanese education system by engaging principals in leadership inquiry as insider reformers.

The participants' dedication to inclusion, novelty, and improvement at the school level shaped their perspectives. To significantly influence ongoing dialogue on conducive learning environments, participants employed their insider knowledge, hands-on insights, and cooperative spirit. Specifically, when addressing the challenges of school leadership in Bhutan's evolving educational context, principals' constructive involvement highlighted the importance of action research as a participatory, grounded, and empowering approach.

Background to Intervention

Principals in Trashigang face multiple interrelated challenges in cultivating a conducive learning environment. One of the pertinent challenges is the lack of professional training in behavioural administration and psychosocial support. For students from disadvantaged or traumatized family backgrounds, most of the principals are inadequately prepared to address their behavioural needs.

The lack of adequate professional counselling services in most of the schools further complicates the situation, forcing principals to assume responsibilities that are beyond their professional expertise. Efforts to cultivate conducive learning environments are further impeded by partial interaction with parents and communities. Particularly in boarding schools, minimal parental participation creates a gap between the home and the school, leading to less cooperative support networks.

Additionally, in recent years, administrative issues encountered by principals have significantly increased. Many principals report a diversion from their primary role as instructional leaders due to managerial and bureaucratic compliance challenges. These challenges restrict classroom observation, mentoring, and academic activities. Additionally, the physical conditions of classrooms in many schools are sub-optimal, with poorly organised learning spaces, inadequate furniture, and poor ventilation or sanitation. These environmental challenges influence student involvement and comfort, further impacting teachers' motivation and the overall school physical ambience. These challenges create a demanding leadership environment, compelling principals to address issues without adequate systemic support and highlighting the urgent need for context-responsive interventions.

Intervention

The goal is to collaboratively improve the behavioural and instructional support systems in Trashigang schools by allowing principals to implement context-responsive leadership strategies grounded in reflection, indigenous values, and collaborative inquiry.

Interventions cycles were collaboratively developed by the researcher, his critical friend and principals (research participants) to solve primary contextual challenges identified during the reconnaissance phase. These interventions targeted five interrelated domains: behaviour management, instructional leadership, physical and psychosocial environment, community engagement, and reflective leadership.

To address the recurring concern of student behaviour and emotional well-being, school principals implemented restorative and culturally responsive behaviour management strategies. These included restorative circle training to promote empathetic listening and conflict resolution, student reflection journals to enhance self-regulation, and peer mediation sessions to build collaborative problem-solving skills. This component supported the research aim by improving the relational dynamics of the learning environment, following the reflective action cycle of 'reflect → act → observe → reflect'.

In the domain of instructional leadership, a structured model of peer lesson observation and collaborative lesson planning was introduced. Principals and teachers utilized peer observation checklists and conducted joint feedback sessions to refine teaching strategies. This intervention responded directly to the study's focus on instructional improvement and created space for professional dialogue around pedagogy, adhering to the cycle of 'planning → acting → observing'.

Recognising the impact of physical ambience on learning, schools launched initiatives to enhance the environmental and psychosocial climate. These included school beautification drives, classroom well-being corners, and the development of behavioural expectation charters co-created with students. These efforts aligned with the study's interest in holistic learning environments and

followed an ‘intervention → evaluation’ approach to measure student and teacher satisfaction and morale.

As the strategy to support community involvement, principals organised monthly parent-teacher meetings and engaged local elders in student mentorship. These meetings are guided by indigenous wisdom and Bhutanese cultural values, supporting community duties for students’ well-being. These interventions strengthened stakeholder autonomy of creating conducive learning environment and demonstrated the action research cycle of ‘inclusion → ownership → internalisation’, thus reinforcing the participatory model of this action research.

All participants exhibited similar interventions that showed a shared commitment to leadership reflection. Principals documented their processes, insights, and challenges in monthly reflection journals and shared findings during collaborative debriefing workshops. These practices institutionalised reflective inquiry and empowered school leaders to adapt their strategies through iterative learning. This continuous spiral of ‘reflection–action–reflection’ served as the core methodological engine of the study.

By contextualising interventions within the Trashigang educational landscape and anchoring them in real-time collaboration, this first cycle of action research marked a significant step toward reimagining school leadership as an adaptive, reflective, and contextually grounded practice. The activities not only responded to the study’s guiding question—how school principals can foster conducive learning environments through inclusive, context-responsive strategies—but also laid the groundwork for a second cycle of inquiry grounded in local wisdom and empowered leadership.

Findings and Discussion

The implementation of the initial action research cycle in Trashigang played a significant role in redefining school principals’ roles as reflective leaders, contextual innovators, and co-researchers rather than administrative bureaucrats. The action research aimed to address important school leadership challenges through contextual interventions, guided by the action research spiral of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006). The post-intervention analysis revealed that culturally rooted, practice-based knowledge and cooperative approaches could change school environments.

One of the most significant effects of the intervention was in the area of student behaviour management. By utilising restorative practices such as circle conversations, student reflection journals, and peer mediation, principals noticed a significant decrease in disciplinary issues and an improvement in students’ interpersonal skills. For instance, students shared their beliefs openly, enabling them to resolve conflicts with empathy. This also reflected their collaborative behaviours developed through the use of reflection tools. These changes emerged not through imposition but participatory engagement. The emphasis on indigenous values such as respect, collaboration, and accountability reflected deeply with students and teachers. These findings acknowledge the view that culturally sensitive interventions, when associated with participatory beliefs, can reinstate behavioural rules and relational collaboration within schools (Dahmen-Adkins, 2025; Smith, 2019)

Similarly, interventions that impact instructional leadership was also crucial. Principals developed structured peer lesson observations and collaborative planning sessions employing tools such as observation checklists and teacher feedback forms. These interactions conceptualised the

leadership function from supervisor to facilitator. Teachers who once perceived classroom observation with apprehension began viewing it as a collegial exchange that promoted growth. Reflection discussions following observations demonstrated increased awareness of differentiated instruction, inclusive pedagogical methods, and learner engagement approaches. For the principals, the intervention reconnected to the academic mission of their role, which had been overshadowed by administrative challenges. The findings recommended that peer-driven supervision models can democratise professional learning and reestablish instructional leadership as the vital part of school development (Sandoval Mena& Waitoller, 2025; Young, 2012).

The physical and psychosocial school environment was often overlooked in policy, but important practices have addressed this through low-cost, student-led initiatives. Schools that undertook beautification activities, established classroom well-being spaces, and co-created behavioural practices experienced significant improvements in classroom tone, student morale, and teacher satisfaction. In some cases, physical reorganisation of learning spaces enabled better attention and cooperation from students. While infrastructural deficiencies like poor ventilation or overcrowding still existed, the process of involving students in shaping their environment facilitated autonomy, belonging, and pride. These small-scale, impactful interventions underscored a key insight: creating a conducive learning environment is not solely dependent on resources, but it also depends on relationships, routines, and respect for space.

Intervention to reintroduce community involvement was one of the most effective results. Engaging parents through parents' teacher meeting and involving local elders as mentors forged the conventional idea of the school as an isolated organisation. These interventions catered to emotional and cultural gap between school and home, particularly for boarding schools where parental involvement is minimum. Elders and local leaders shared their insights on indigenous wisdom to the younger generation, and parents felt more valued. For students, these collaborations led to feelings of extended family, trust, and intergenerational continuity. The findings revealed the significance of respecting indigenous communal values and demonstrated that culturally embedded engagement approaches can reinforce school community network and increase shared responsibility for student well-being.

Reflective leadership played a critical role and was considered important for all these domains. As a part of professional programmes, the start of principal journals and monthly reflection led a profound internal transformation for the principals. These reflective approaches were agents for personal reflection, vulnerability, and growth beyond administrative tasks. Principals employed their journals to ascertain conventional beliefs, analyse the impact of their decisions, and co-develop strategies with staff and students. The collaborative reflection led to the development of a learning community where principals share insights, frustrations, and successes openly and constructively. These adoptions of action research as a mindset rather than an approach enabled a critical development in the leadership system in schools.

The collective analysis of these interventions revealed many cross-cutting themes. First, the incorporation of Bhutanese values in behaviour management, community mentorship and well-being of students was instrumental. Second, context-based, school level interventions created impact, showing that meaningful changes do not need a huge overhaul but impactful and inclusive actions. Third, during this cycle, the principal's role changed from managing systems to leading change, from responding to initiating change, and from working in silos to collaborating with others to develop

effective solutions.

These results support the use of action research as a powerful tool for educational reform in Bhutan at the school level. Relying on indigenous knowledge, collaborative processes, and iterative process, the study fostered school leaders to address their own contextual challenges instead of importing generic approaches. When empowered as action researchers, principals are in a critical position to bridge the gap between policy and practice and to nurture learning environments that are emotionally safe, academically sound, and culturally rigorous, as confirmed by the findings.

The success implementation of this first cycle encourages a sustained dedication as practitioner-led research. By expanding participation to other districts in Bhutan and strengthening involvement in identified areas, such as instructional coaching and restorative discipline subsequent cycles can be built on this foundation. A comprehensive, inclusive, and values-based educational system can be created by school principals in Bhutan with the necessary requirements such as autonomy, training, and mentorship.

The result from the post-intervention illustrates that transformation can be both attainable and sustainable when school leadership practices are based on reflection, communication, and cultural relevance. This study supports the fundamental belief of action research, that those who embrace challenges are best equipped to develop meaningful transformation through highly contextualised, participatory, iterative, and action rather than predetermined answers.

Reflection

This action research study began with a deep recognition: that school leadership in rural Bhutan, particularly in Trashigang district, functions within complex, limited resources and culturally diverse environments. While national education policies promote learner-centered practices, value-based education, and inclusive leadership, the implementation of these principles into remote school contexts often encounters systemic, infrastructural, and pedagogical challenges. As an insider-researcher rooted in Bhutan's education system, I conducted this study not as an external evaluator but as a reflective practitioner seeking to collaboratively create solutions with fellow school leaders through inquiry, action, and shared learning.

The initial phase reconnaissance and problem identification were both insightful and humbling. Through open-ended questionnaires and informal dialogue, it emerged that principals were not only facing challenges such as behavioural issues and instructional pressures but were also burdened by administrative responsibilities. I also realised that they lacked adequate training in psychosocial support and operated in physically limited learning spaces. These findings laid the foundation for co-developing meaningful interventions and positioned principals not merely as research participants but as co-researchers in a collective endeavour toward improvement.

Designing interventions collaboratively was an important point in the research process. It marked the transformation from observation to ownership. Guided by Kemmis and McTaggart's participatory model, the interventions emphasised five key domains: behaviour management, instructional leadership, environmental and emotional well-being, community engagement, and reflective practice. These were not externally mandated strategies, but context-related actions determined by the lived experiences of the school leaders themselves. Principals developed their own approaches, introducing restorative circles, engaging in peer lesson observations, beautifying

classrooms, conducting parent dialogue activities, and maintaining personal reflection journals. This process highlighted the democratic spirit of action research, where agency, perceptions, and local wisdom are important for a cycle of change.

Adaptability to context became increasingly evident throughout the implementation process. Not every approach worked as planned. Some required modification, negotiation, or reconsideration in response to contextual limitations. For instance, Behavioural interventions had to be reframed as collaborative learning opportunities rather than assessments, and they needed to be attuned to local values and sensitivities. These adaptations were not failures; they were reflections of the iterative nature of action research, where reflections were a constant, active process – an integral aspect of practice, not merely afterthoughts.

Observing changes in leadership identity was considered the most impactful factor of the action research journey. Through inquiry and reflection, principals began to view themselves as reflective managers rather than merely as administrators, thereby contributing to changes in school culture. Principals employed reflection journals for critical reflection where they analysed their presumptions, decisions, and personal developments. The monthly meetings fostered peer communication, nurtured solidarity among leaders, and led to the development of a learning community built on mutual trust and purpose.

The contribution of indigenous knowledge and cultural significance in transforming interventions was significant. Students received mentorship from the local elders. Local values were incorporated into discipline practices, and behavioural management was collaboratively developed with learners. Findings served as a meaningful reminder that educational transformation in Bhutan must be grounded in policy frameworks as well as in the insights, ethics, and relational patterns of its people.

As the cycle came to an end, what remained most noticeable was not just the visible improvements, such as a few behavioural incidents, better classroom participation, or increased community involvement, but also a shift in mindset. Action research became integrated into the principals' minds as a consistent, reflective, and interactive approach to leadership.

Action research journey affirmed that it is more than a methodology. It additionally represents the pedagogy of optimism and transformation. It emphasises local skill over imported models, insightful leadership over top-down management, and engagement over prescription. Action research was a contextually relevant agent of transforming education in Bhutan, which is represented by the beliefs of harmony, community, and Gross National Happiness. The foundation has been laid for future research, as well as a leadership culture that is responsive, inclusive, and firmly rooted in the community this project aims to serve. The groundwork has been laid for future studies as well as a leadership value that is responsive, inclusive, and firmly rooted in the community this project aims to serve as it transitions into its next cycle.

Conclusion

Throughout reflective leadership, participatory practices, and culturally rooted school-level approaches, this action research showed that school principals in Trashigang district can transform learning environments. Contextual interventions include prioritizing professional development such as behaviour management, providing schools with maximum financial autonomy, and including

reflective leadership cycles among districts. The Ministry of Education and Skills Development include policy recommendations that emphasise incorporating restorative and community-based methods within national frameworks to foster equity and inclusivity. The findings emphasise the value of small-scale, context-responsive realities that lead to significant impact. Future studies might explore longitudinal cycles across multiple districts, compare rural and urban school realities, and sustainable models for involving participatory leadership activities.

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