



Students' perception of community as classroom for learning Geography in middle secondary school

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ABSTRACT

It is crucial to collaborate with the local community for learning to assist students in understanding reality given the changing needs of the world. By considering this perspective, a community-centred approach is embedded within local to global contexts to enhance students' learning and civic development. However, the Department of Curriculum and Professional Development (2019) revealed that Community-Based Learning is rarely integrated into Geography lessons. Given these contexts, the present study seeks to explore the use of Community as Classroom (CAC) as a teaching strategy in learning Geography in middle secondary schools. As guided by pragmatism, a mixed-method design is applied to assess the students' perceptions of the use of CAC as a learning strategy. The study also explored the relationship between the use of CAC strategy and students' learning outcomes, opportunities, challenges and relevancy of CAC in the Bhutanese Geography curriculum. The survey questionnaires were administered to 264 students and four focus group interviews consisting of 6 members in a group were conducted and employed a purposive sampling strategy. Responses were analyzed using statistical and thematic analysis followed by triangulation of the quantitative and qualitative findings. The study revealed that the CAC strategy was relevant in enhancing social and academic standards. The findings indicated that the communities have abundant resources and the use of CAC strategy has imperative opportunities. However, this potential is hindered by several challenges. Moreover, the findings are consistent with the Bhutan Baccalaureate which considered community inclusion towards the creation of a knowledgeable and sustainable society.

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INTRODUCTION

Place-Based Education [PBE] is considered to be an emerging trend in the landscape of education reform and is now being practiced by educators around the world. Over the years, PBE progressively evolved as an operative among many other 21st century learning approaches creating platforms for educators and policymakers to explore, understand and incorporate towards the enhancement of social and academic fineness.

PBE as defined by Sobel (2014), the process of using the local community and environment as a starting point to teach concepts in language, arts, mathematics, social studies, science, and other subjects across the curriculum. While, Teton Science School [TSS] (2017) described PBE as an educational philosophy entrenched in environmental education and is also known as place-based learning, environment-based education, and education for sustainability. However, Smith (2017) claimed that the place-based approach could be differentiated although it is deeply rooted in environmental education because the pioneers of PBE emphasized both social and natural environments. As the PBE approach came into 21st century learning environments, educators have appraised the pragmatic impacts on enriching students' learning experiences and boosting learning outcomes.

As designed by TSS (2019), the six principles of the PBE namely Local to Global context, Learner-Centered, Inquiry-Based, Design Thinking, Community as Classroom [CAC] and Interdisciplinary Approach. These principles emphasize practical, actual learning experiences, increase students' autonomy in learning, develop students' agency, build the school-community relationship, promote appreciation for the natural world and encourage ownership of the communities and commitment as active participants towards the betterment of the societies.

PBE is acknowledged as an effective approach to learning as it uses society and the local environment for learning. Gruenewald (2008) proposes that PBE enhances student engagement and comprehension through experiential, multidisciplinary, and intergenerational learning, benefiting both skill acquisition and community well-being. Therefore, it is understood that PBE is regarded as an educational approach that uses the local community as a classroom for learning.

The CAC is a prolific strategy used in learning across the curriculum for the betterment of students' learning outcomes. Koinis (2016) define it as a wide variety of instructional methods and programs that educators use to connect what is being taught in the school to their community. More specifically, TSS (2016) highlighted CAC as an intended pedagogical approach to integrate as an instructional strategy for teaching and learning in the modern educational system with the creation of space for students towards community engagement. The CAC approach is regarded as a teaching strategy that bridges real-world practice and academic theory because as suggested by Symeonidis and Schwarz (2016), this pedagogical approach in the teaching-learning process will create experiential and engaging learning and simultaneously seeks to address practical problems depending upon community interests and needs. Furthermore, Ark et al. (2020) postulated that the CAC strategy can help to develop commitment towards learning and encourage becoming a contributing citizen in the community.

For Geography education, PBE's principle, the CAC has emerged as one of the most effective modern pedagogical strategies of learning for young learners to match current trends of the world. The Ministry of Education [MoE] (2017) further reiterated the urgency and need to review the Geography curriculum. Accordingly, the development of a standard Geography Curriculum Framework was initiated by keeping the ideas, needs, and aspirations of today's learners to match the current trends of the world (MoE, 2017). Therefore, CAC is seen as an effective strategy for learning Geography to create meaningful, engaging, authentic, and experiential learning for students (Department of Curriculum and Professional Development [DCPD], 2017). Moreover, Powdye (2014) revealed that lessons in Bhutanese classrooms have contents infused with Gross National Happiness [GNH] values in community vitality. Therefore, the CAC strategy ensures strong school-community bonds through hands-on learning, fostering practical connections between the two. Moreover, it helps students to inquire about problems and identify the solutions for social changes and enhance the promotion of GNH values.

Further, Sobel (2004) emphasized that incorporating CAC enables personalized, meaningful learning experiences, fostering problem-solving, community-focused solutions, and impactful social change through active civic engagement. Moreover, it is understood that the incorporation of the CAC strategy will enhance the connection with the community and boost learning outcomes. Therefore, the use of the CAC as an instructional strategy in learning Geography in middle secondary schools [MSS] in Bhutan will promote community cohesion, augment learning experiences and lift academic standards.

Problem Statement

The educational landscape in Bhutan faces challenges in implementing PBE and CAC strategies. Despite the rollout of PBE programs and training for educators, there's a disconnect between these strategies and actual classroom practices (DCPD, 2019). For instance, the Education Professional Development trained more than 500 educators in the PBE program in 2017 (DCPD, 2017). However, Koinis (2016) revealed that Geography textbooks offer opportunities for CAC integration, yet teacher-centred instruction prevails, limiting meaningful engagement with local resources and community. Similarly, Utha et al. (2016) found that traditional teaching methods, examination-oriented assessments, and a standardized curriculum hinder the adoption of student-centred and real-world learning approaches.

Geography, which involves understanding the planet's features, could greatly benefit from CAC, given the rich local resources available. Although the relevance of PBE to the Bhutanese curriculum and its potential to improve learning outcomes are recognized, however, challenges persist. Koinis (2016) revealed that participants in professional development [PD] workshops have cited factors such as curriculum structure, resource availability, time constraints, and lack of administrative support as barriers to implementing PBE and CAC.

Despite empirical evidence of PBE's positive impacts, it has not been formally integrated into the MSS Geography curriculum (DCPD, 2019). Therefore, this study aimed to explore students' perceptions of using CAC as an instructional strategy in learning Geography in MSS. Further, the study seeks to uncover the future possibilities of incorporating the CAC strategy into the Geography curriculum.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study aimed to explore the students' perception of using the CAC as a teaching strategy in learning Geography in MSS. The objectives of the study were to explore the students' perceptions of the use of the CAC strategy in learning Geography and assess students' views on the relationship between the use of the CAC as a learning strategy and students' learning outcomes. It also intended to examine the relevance of integrating CAC as a teaching strategy in the Geography curriculum.

Research Questions

Primary Question: What are the students' perceptions on the use of the CAC as a teaching strategy for learning Geography in middle secondary schools?

Sub-Questions:

1. How do students view the use of the community as classroom strategy in learning Geography?
2. To what extent do the teachers use the community as classroom as a teaching strategy to teach Geography?
3. What are students' perceptions of the relationship between the use of the community as classroom strategy and students' learning outcomes?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Concept of Community as Classroom

The CAC approach is a contemporary educational strategy rooted in PBE principles, aimed at enhancing learning outcomes by integrating local communities and real-world experiences into teaching and learning (TSS, 2019). According to TSS (2016), CAC is synonymous with concepts like Community-Based Learning (CBL), Place-Based Learning [PBL] and Community-Based Education (CBE). Its essence lies in connecting academic learning with the cultural, historical, and natural assets of the local community. Similarly, Koinis (2016) claimed CAC is an educational philosophy and instructional approach adopted by educators through connecting lessons being taught in the schools to their local community, cultural and natural environment. Thus, in general, CAC is a teaching-learning strategy used by educators that bridges academic learning and real-world practices by adopting the methods of direct engagement to give students a deeper understanding of lessons and the community.

Community as Classroom and Practices in the School Curriculum

The concept of CAC has historical roots and has been utilized by educators worldwide as a teaching-learning strategy for many years. The idea of connecting learning to the local environment has ancient origins, dating back to the Greeks and Romans (Elfer, 2014). Moreover, Smith (2017) found that institutions and schools globally have employed the CAC approach, gaining notable attention since the early 2000s. In the United States, the TSS has been a pioneer in PBE since its establishment in 1967. Similarly, teachers and students have been utilizing the CAC approach, although there is a lack of documented evidence of its implementation in Bhutan (Koinis, 2016).

TSS places PBE at the heart of its programs and collaborates with organizations like GETTING SMART to promote and model PBE on a national and global scale (TSS, 2016). Phenomenon-based learning in Finland shares a pedagogical approach similar to CAC, where interdisciplinary learning is emphasized (Symeonidis & Schwarz, 2016). PBL addresses real-world issues like climate change by integrating concepts from various subjects such as Geography, History, Science, Economics, and Mathematics. This aligns with the principles of PBE, as learners engage with authentic local-to-global phenomena, applying multiple perspectives to their studies (Symeonidis & Schwarz, 2016).

Opportunities of Using Community as Classroom Strategy

The CAC is a learner-centred, multidisciplinary instructional strategy employed by teachers to enhance education by either bringing the community into the classroom or taking the classroom to the community. Sobel (2004) stated that the infusion of the CAC strategy yields significant positive impacts on student engagement, skill acquisition, experiential learning, and overall learning outcomes. This approach fosters a deep understanding of course content through real-world experiences, encouraging students to inquire, identify community needs, and drive positive social change.

Additionally, integrating the CAC pedagogical strategy into Geography education creates experiential and motivating learning environments (Smith, 2017). Similarly, students are inspired to explore geographical concepts through geo-inquiry questions, actively participating and acquiring skills in remote sensing, Geographic Information System, and geospatial analysis (Williams, 2017).

CAC, as an intentional curriculum dimension, enables students to practice and apply subject-specific skills and knowledge while addressing community issues. This strategy cultivates competent citizenship by encouraging students to identify and address community concerns, fostering a sense of purpose and engagement (Melaville et al., 2019). By thoughtfully designing and implementing CAC, educators establish a pedagogy of engagement, where students invest genuine effort and attention, leading to meaningful learning experiences (Hutson, 2011).

Through CAC, the gap between knowledge, skills, and community action is bridged, creating a sense of connection and balance between what learners must learn and what they can contribute. Ultimately, the CAC strategy empowers students to become active participants in their communities while developing essential skills and knowledge, resulting in enriched learning and meaningful civic engagement.

Challenges of Using Community as Classroom Strategy for Learning

Despite having many benefits and opportunities available for students, community partners and teachers from using the CAC strategy, there are many challenges encountered while adopting teaching-learning processes. The three main challenges as mentioned by Morton (2009) are time, the lack of feedback, reflection and evaluation. He mentioned that engaging in the CAC strategy can take more time and energy than the traditional way of teaching the curriculum. The more time is spent because students require more time while carrying the tasks. Additionally, Smith (2017) substantiated that a lack of teachers' and students' knowledge of local community and resources hinders learning and limits the development of skills, creation of knowledge and experiences if resources are not used astutely.

Further, Howley et al. (2011) explained that cultural differences sometimes cause limitations because people who tend to have different norms, expectations, beliefs, and values may inadvertently breach the rules of other cultures leading to a breakdown of a school-community relationship. The implementation of the CAC strategy demands the hands of multi-stakeholders and a lack of support from school administration and community partners will leave the implementation of the CAC strategy questionable (Morton, 2009). Furthermore, the use of this strategy involves risk and the safety of learners should be a priority. Moreover, large class sizes and a lack of efficient transport facilities will limit the use of the CAC strategy in learning Geography (DCPD, 2019).

PBE and CAC in Bhutanese Curriculum

The PBE approach has become a familiar concept within the Bhutanese curriculum, introduced through collaboration with TSS in 2008 (Griffin, 2019). This partnership was facilitated by the Jim Peterson Bhutan Education Trust Fund. Over the years, multiple initiatives have been conducted in collaboration with TSS to promote PBE in Bhutan. In 2017, the Education PD program took the lead in implementing PBE, training a significant number of curriculum officers, master trainers, teachers, principals, and vice principals (DCPD, 2018). Notably, four focal schools received orientation on the PBE approach.

Responding to the evolving global education landscape, Samtse College of Education [SCE] established a connection with TSS in 2009. This collaboration led to the integration of PBE into various academic programs, including MEd, Postgraduate, and B.Ed., with the establishment of the Centre for Innovation in Science Education and Research to document academic experiences through PBE (Kinley & Griffin, 2017).

PBE has been piloted in the Environmental Studies [EVS] infused English and Dzongkha curriculum. DCPD report (2019) revealed that an implementation survey in 2018 highlighted PBE's significant relevance to the Bhutanese curriculum and learning outcomes. As a result, PBE has been officially incorporated into the primary curriculum, with plans to progressively expand its integration into higher key stages (DCPD, 2019).

In 2017, the Bhutan Youth Development Fund [YDF] collaborated with TSS to initiate a PBE program in My Gakidh Village School in Talhogang, Punakha. This program adopts a village-as-school concept, extending learning beyond the school gate and integrating education at various levels within the village (Dorji & Sivitskis, 2021).

Theoretical Underpinning

This study is grounded in the theoretical frameworks of social constructivism by Vygotsky (1978) and constructivist theory of perception by Gregory (1970). These theories provide a structured and aligned foundation for investigating the use of the CAC strategy in the context of learning Geography.

Social constructivism emphasizes the importance of social interactions and collaborative learning in the construction of knowledge (Schreiber & Valle, 2013; Thomas et al., 2014). In the context of the research questions, which likely involve exploring the effectiveness of CAC in Geography education, social constructivism is relevant because it emphasizes that learners actively construct knowledge by integrating new information with their prior understanding. The CAC strategy aligns with this theory as it involves active engagement with the community, facilitating the co-construction of knowledge through shared experiences. Additionally, the learners’ interactions with the community can lead to deeper insights and personal connections, which may be integral to understanding Geography within real-world contexts.

Similarly, the constructivist theory of perception supports this study by asserting that knowledge is built upon prior experiences and knowledge. This theory highlights that knowledge is built upon prior experiences and individual perception (Gregory, 1970). It suggests that learners construct their understanding of the world through their thoughts and imagination. In the context of the research questions and the CAC strategy, this theory is relevant because it supports the notion that learners can make sense of Geography by actively engaging with the local environment and experts. The CAC strategy encourages learners to construct their understanding of Geography by connecting with real-world experiences and the local community, which can lead to meaningful and realistic perceptions of geographical concepts.

METHODS

The pragmatism was significantly suitable for this study as this paradigm allows the possibility and potential to work back and forth between quantitative and qualitative data and offers researchers the opportunities to examination for useful points of connection between two types of data. As guided by pragmatism, a mixed-method approach is applied to this study. This method consists of both qualitative and quantitative methods and it is believed that the mixed method is widely adopted by researchers while carrying out social science research (Creswell, 2014). More specifically, the convergent parallel mixed method design is applied for this study to explore the perception of the learners on the use of the CAC as an instructional strategy in learning Geography in MSS.

Conceptual Framework

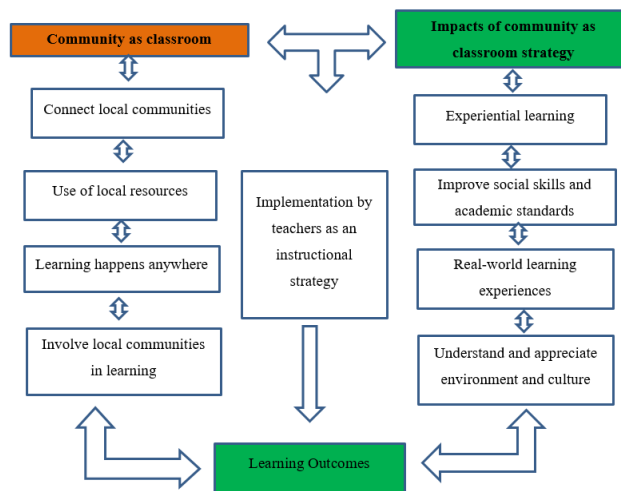


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework in reference to Vygotsky (1976) and Gregory (1970).

This conceptual framework focuses on how the use of the CAC as an instructional strategy in learning Geography could improve the learning outcomes of the students. Local communities serve as a learning ecosystem for learning where places become part of a classroom and experiences, and local and regional experts are part of resources and partners for learning. The implementation of this approach can not only gain experiential learning and improve academic outcomes but also connect with the communities and help in understanding and appreciating community values.

Population and Sample Description

The target population for this study comprised MSS students in Tsirang Dzongkhag, specifically those enrolled in Classes IX and X (264 students where 144 were males and 120 females). The sampling methods of Cochran (1977) and purposive sampling were employed to ensure the selection of a suitable and relevant subset of this target population for participation in the survey questionnaires and focus group interviews. Respondents for survey questionnaires were randomly picked and a focus group [FG] interview participants were chosen using purposive sampling from each school ensuring principles and ethics of mentioned sampling methods to get relevant information, avoid bias and better representations for the study.

Data Collection Tools and Procedures

Survey Questionnaires

Data collection is conducted through survey questionnaires. The survey questionnaires (19 items) under two themes (perception and practice) using the 6-point Likert Scale. The rating scale ranges from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

Focus Group Interviews

To make findings valid and reliable, One FG interview consisting of six participants from each school was employed for this study to collect qualitative data. The nine semi-structured interview questions are employed and these questions were designed to get accurate information from participants on the perception of the use of the CAC strategy, opportunities and challenges of CAC strategy in learning Geography in MSS.

Data Analysis

Quantitative Data Analysis

The survey questionnaires were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Science software [SPSS] version 22 software. The quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics based on the scores of the mean and standard deviations for all the themes. Moreover, Pearson's correlation was utilized to explore the students' perception of the use of the CAC strategy and learning outcomes. The frequency of the participants' rating is categorized into six distinct levels using Best and Kahn's (2002) criteria as shown in Table 1 and the adapted mean interpretation scale of Brown (2010) as shown in Table 2.

Table 1. View of 6 Points Likert Scale

Mean Range	Rank
0.01 -1.00	Strongly disagree
1.01-2.00	Disagree
2.01-3.00	Somewhat disagree
3.01-4.00	Somewhat agree
4.01-5.00	Agree
5.01-6.00	Strongly agree

Similarly, 5-point frequency scales were employed to discuss the theme ‘Practice of CAC strategy in learning Geography’. The ranking of the mean range was classified according to the range of mean scores that indicate the frequency of occurrence.

Table 2. View of 5 Points Frequency Likert Scale

Mean Range	Rank
0.01 -1.00	Never
1.01-2.00	Rarely
2.01-3.00	Sometimes
3.01-4.00	Often
4.01-5.00	Always

*Adapted from Brown (2010).

Qualitative Data Analysis

The study adopted the thematic analysis of Clarke and Braun (2022) to analyze data. The data collected from FG interviews were transcribed, coded, and categorized into different themes based on research questions and sub-questions.

Data Triangulation

Creswell (2014) emphasized that employing data triangulation is a crucial and prominent approach used by researchers to enhance the credibility and confirmation of study outcomes, involving both qualitative and quantitative data and analyses. Therefore, this study utilized triangulation, employing a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, to explore students’ perceptions of the CAC.

Reliability and Validity

The qualitative data findings were verified using the four trustworthiness criteria. The quantitative and qualitative instruments’ reliability and validity were assessed through oversight by experts, and member-checking involving a subset of participants. The survey questionnaires underwent a pilot test with 150 students from one of the MSS under Samtse Dzongkhag. Utilizing SPSS 22, a Cronbach’s Alpha score of .79 was obtained, confirming the reliability and validity of the survey instruments.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic Profile

The study collected quantitative data from secondary schools employing the students of classes IX and X. A total of 264 survey respondents; 71 from each of the three Central Schools and 51 from a MSS. Additionally, the study also collected qualitative data through FG interviews. For each of the four schools, each FG consisted of 6 students considering gender equality.

Concept of Place-Based Education and Community as Classroom

Understanding PBE is viewed as important because 21st century learning demands engaging and experiential learning. The understanding of the PBE in the schools is a prerequisite to getting reliable data for the study to assess awareness and knowledge of CAC and PBE as shown in Figure 2.

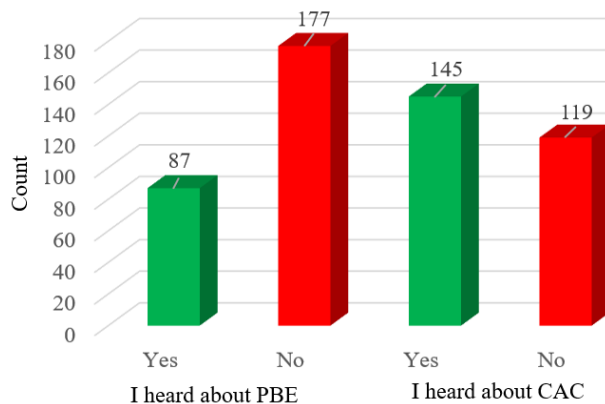


Fig. 2. Students' Response on PBE and CAC.

The analysis of results from Figure 2 revealed that the majority of students in the schools were unaware of PBE. Out of 264 respondents, 87 answered 'Yes' and 177 answered 'No'. This suggested that only 32.9% of respondents were familiar with PBE, introduced in Bhutan in 2008. Additionally, 54.9% knew about 'community as a classroom,' while 45.1% respondents did not. The quantitative data confirmed students' lack of familiarity with PBE and the CAC strategy in MSS.

The study demonstrated that the student's knowledge of PBE and CAC is limited even though Bhutan strengthened the place-based approach in our education system by building the competence of educators, administrators, and institutions. For instance, partnering with TSS, the first workshop on PBE was conducted in Bhutan with eight teachers in 2008 (Koinis, 2016). A yearly visit of TSS experts since 2013 further supported in conducting of PD Programs for teachers across the nation to implant PBE in our school system (DCPD, 2017). In addition, SCE introduced PBE in 2009 and was able to integrate the PBE program for teacher trainees including masters' students (Kinley & Griffin, 2017). However, the findings of the study showed that 67.1% of survey respondents responded that they did not hear about PBE. Similarly, interview participants shared that the PBE approaches are new to them. This means that the majority of the students in MSS are not aware of PBL approaches. On the other hand, the majority of the participants have shared that they are aware of the CAC strategy but have no knowledge of the concept.

Several factors may have been associated with not gaining the momentum of PBL approaches in MSS. First, a report by DCPD (2019) pointed out that PBE is formally implemented across the curriculum of PP-VI and without formal implementation in secondary schools may have kept students away from being informed about this approach. Second, a smaller number of teachers are oriented on PBE. The majority of the teachers who are in the system are not aware of place-based approaches and lack of knowledge and skills may have limited its implementation although many of them use each of the six principles of PBE consciously or unconsciously while teaching (Koinis, 2016). Finally, large classroom sizes, time constraints and the vastness of the syllabus may have challenged educators to use PBE approaches in schools regularly (DCPD, 2018). As a result, the impact of PBE has hardly gone beyond the schools.

Students' Perception of the Use of Community as Classroom Strategy

Table 3 illustrates a descriptive analysis of students' perception of the use of CAC strategy with the overall mean scores ($M = 5.02$, $SD = .90$). The finding suggested that students have a positive perception of the use of CAC strategy in learning Geography. The learners' perceptions were interpreted using the Brown model scale.

Similarly, the qualitative findings are aligned with the quantitative findings. For example, FG1 & FG2 mentioned, "The CAC strategy is new to us but we think that it is an effective and exciting approach for learning Geography as learning takes place anywhere". Similar feelings were expressed by FG2, who stated, "It is very rare

but sometimes when we go out, it is fun”. Moreover, FG3 viewed that the surroundings have plenty of geographical information and teachers should use the CAC strategy so that learning Geography will be exciting and enriching.

Table 3. Students’ Rating on the Perception of Use of the CAC

Sl. No	Item	Mean	SD
B1	I feel excited when Geography learning takes place outside the classroom.	5.42	.79
B2	I think Geography subject can be learned outside the classroom.	4.86	.85
B3	The teacher should use community as classroom approach for teaching Geography.	5.13	.79
B4	I think learning from the surrounding community will connect what is being taught in the classroom.	5.15	.83
B5	I know the local community has resources that help in learning Geography.	4.98	.90
B6	My teacher has good knowledge of the use of community as classroom strategy.	4.76	1.01
B7	The teacher should take us to local communities to teach Geography subject.	5.00	.98
B8	I like the Geography subject being taught using the community as classroom approach.	5.08	.80
B9	I feel safe when the teacher takes us outside to teach Geography.	4.74	1.02
B10	I feel motivated to learn Geography when community as classroom strategy is being used by teachers.	5.09	1.02
Average mean		5.02	.90

The analysis of quantitative and qualitative data confirmed that the CAC is an effective instructional approach that excites learners to learn the lessons as learning can happen anywhere rather than in a fixed place. Their perception is further supported by Ark et al. (2020) where it is signified that the CAC is a learning strategy that educators can implement in rural and urban areas. Similarly, Ark et al. (2020) articulated that PBE is anytime, anywhere learning that leverages the power of place to personalize learning.

The Participants of the study wished their teachers to use this learning approach as an instructional strategy in learning Geography. This is because students are starting to explore how community-based learning can enhance access, promote equity, and improve learning outcomes. These findings are well corresponded to the work of Linnemanstons and Jordan (2017) who concluded that the PBL approach has a significant impact on students’ collaboration, engagement, and affluence of learning. Besides academic gain, Melaville et al. (2019) stated that when the community is offered as an integral part of the curriculum, and supportive relationship, the CAC approach can allow students to apply academic knowledge in multiple community settings.

Similarly, DCPD (2018) pointed out that PBE is an effective strategy for learning Geography to create meaningful, engaging, authentic, and experiential learning for students. The growing national interest in skill-based learning coupled with the impacts reported by the implementation survey of the DCPD (2019) suggested that the interest in PBE could continue to expand in the coming decades. However, the report also stated that PBE is not formally integrated into the Geography curriculum of MSS though some teachers incorporate PBE and its principles as their teaching strategy.

Students’ Perception of the Use of the Community as Classroom and Students’ Learning Outcomes

As shown in Table 4, Pearson’s correlation between students’ perception of the use of CAC and their learning outcomes was found to be moderately positive and statistically significant ($r = .474, p < .001$). This shows that the use of CAC can enhance the student’s learning outcomes. Similarly, the qualitative data also highlights that the students have a positive opinion on learning outcomes if the CAC strategy is used in learning.

Table 4. Pearson’s Correlation Coefficient

Theme	Perception	Learning Outcomes
Perception	Pearson Correlation	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.474**
	N	.000
		264
		264

***. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).*

The finding is in line with Powers (2004) where the researcher found that PBE pedagogies have not only enhanced school-community relationships but also significantly improved students’ academic achievement when learning happens hands-on experiences. Additionally, the study revealed that outdoor learning improves academic performance across subjects, reduces disciplinary issues, and benefits both students and their communities.

Similarly, the findings of the current study are consistent with the findings of study by Akbas and Cakmak (2019) who highlighted that students’ post-test scores of academic and social skills were higher than pre-test when the PBL approach was applied. The significant gain of the study based on the CAC strategy in the present study shared a similar finding to other literature (Drexler, 2012; Koinis, 2016; Linnemanstons & Jordan, 2017) who pointed out the expansions in students’ social and academic achievements due to implementation of PBE in teaching and learning. From the comparative analysis of different literature, it is concluded that the community-based learning approach increases students’ academic performance and social skills.

Practice of Community as Classroom Strategy

Table 5 shows the average mean score ($M = 1.97, SD = .83$), indicating that the practice of the CAC strategy is rated *Rarely*. This suggests that the current application of the CAC strategy in Geography instruction within MSS is rare. Similarly, the qualitative results also show that the CAC strategy is rarely practiced. For example, all the FG participants echoed that they rarely go outside to learn. FG2 voiced out, “Our teacher does take us outside but it’s like once in a blue moon”, meaning teachers hardly take students outside and use local communities for learning purposes. Similarly, FG participants articulated:

We are not taken outside the classroom to learn Geography on a regular basis. Sometimes even if we go, we are taken not to have experiments or teach topics that are related to our lessons. It is the mere intention of refreshing our minds and not for intensive learning.

The majority of the FG interview participants opined that most of the time teachers favour lecture methods keeping the students inside the same closed classrooms and rarely use the CAC strategy and other 21st century transformative learning pedagogies.

Table 5. Students’ Rating on Practice of CAC

Sl. No.	Items	Mean	SD
B11	My Geography teacher takes us outside the classroom to teach Geography.	1.97	.94

B12	My Geography teacher invites speakers to speak on content-related topics.	2.25	1.13
B13	My Geography teacher takes us to local communities to teach Geography lessons.	1.52	.83
B14	I used local knowledge and resources for learning Geography.	2.35	.78
B15	Geography teacher uses local knowledge and resources to teach Geography.	2.34	.77
B16	The teacher connects Geography lessons with the local community.	1.97	.72
B17	I visit local places to learn Geography.	1.75	.79
B18	I interact with local people to learn Geography.	1.76	.75
B19	I build relationships with local people to learn and work together.	1.84	.79
Total mean		1.97	.83

The findings of the study revealed that PBL methods are rarely integrated into the teaching of Geography in MSS. This suggests that despite teachers being equipped with knowledge and skills in PBE, its implementation in schools has been limited. This is noteworthy given the clear benefits of place-based approaches in fostering social skills and enriching academic learning. However, efforts to introduce PBE have been initiated, with over 500 in-service teachers, including school Principals, Vice Principals, and teacher trainees, receiving training since 2008 (DCPD, 2018). Additionally, Kinley and Griffin (2017) reported the introduction of this approach at SCE to teacher trainees.

The findings of the study also exposed the existence of poor school-community relationships and least participation from local people to promote the learning of the students. Similarly, almost all the FG participants echoed that most of the time their teachers prefer the lecture method letting students become passive learners listening to lectures the whole day inside the classrooms. A similar finding was shared by Utha et al. (2016) revealing that in Bhutanese schools, the classroom practices are still teacher-centred and syllabus-driven where most of the time learning occurs within the closed classrooms. Additionally, the study of an evaluation of the impacts of the TSS's PBE PD Workshops for Teachers in Bhutan by Koinis (2016) found that Bhutanese teachers seldom teach outdoors and still employ teacher-centred approaches, relying on note-taking and memorization for content delivery. Further, Brinkmann (2019) pointed out that Bhutan has only two teacher training institutes. These institutions prioritize lecture teaching and rote learning, lacking in preparing graduates with modern pedagogies for 21st century learners.

CONCLUSION

CAC is a teaching strategy connecting learning and communities with aims to enhance learner engagement, academic achievement, community impact, and global comprehension. The findings revealed that CAC is a dynamic, effective learning method, that transcends physical boundaries. The study also confirmed communities as valuable assets, offering abundant educational resources. However, educators predominantly employ traditional techniques, indicating limited adoption of place-based approaches and underutilization of local resources for learning despite training on place-based approaches.

The study also suggested employing CAC as an instructional method for teaching Geography in middle secondary schools. They recognized that integrating CAC could shift from teacher-centred to student-centred learning, catering to individual needs, enhancing academic outcomes, fostering cohesion, and promoting social and cultural understanding. It could also improve communication skills, community involvement, and student agency for a harmonious and sustainable society.

Lastly, the findings of the study indicated that the CAC strategy is relevant to the Geography curriculum of middle secondary schools. The participants wished their teachers to use the CAC strategy in teaching Geography. Additionally, the participants perceived that the children are ‘hands-on learners’ and they acquire knowledge through playful interaction with objects and people. While weighing the experiences and findings of the study, based on the limitations, the recommendations are submitted for the progression of PBE and the use of the CAC strategy in learning Geography in Bhutanese classrooms and strengthening the scope for research on similar topics.

RECOMMENDATIONS

While evaluating students’ perceptions of using CAC as an instructional strategy for learning Geography in middle secondary schools, this study proposes four recommendations. Firstly, to enhance the study’s impact and generalizability, a similar study could include participants including both teachers and students from schools nationwide. Secondly, for thorough exploration, employing an exploratory sequential research design is advised to ensure accurate data collection, thereby offering practical insights to readers. Thirdly, considering the study’s findings on the benefits of PBE or the community as a classroom approach, concerned authorities and stakeholders should organize professional development programs for teachers. This will facilitate the effective implementation of PBE by teachers, leading to improved social and academic standards. Finally, involving the local community as a collaborative learning partner should be prioritized, enabling students to gain authentic real-world learning experiences.

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