

Leading with Local Knowledge: How School Leadership in Nepal Mobilises Community Cultural Knowledge to Shape School Policy and Practice

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Abstract

Background: This study examines how school leaders in Indigenous-majority contexts mobilise community cultural knowledge to shape school policy and practice. It draws on culturally responsive leadership and transformative leadership theories and focuses on public schools in southern Lalitpur, Nepal, a region predominantly inhabited by the Tamang community. Although Nepal's education policies promote inclusion and the integration of local knowledge, little is known about how these commitments are enacted at the school level.

Methods: A qualitative exploratory design was employed across four public schools. Data were generated from 14 participants through 6 in-depth interviews with headteachers, one

assistant headteacher, and School Management Committee (SMC) chairpersons; 2 sharing circles involving eight teachers; school observations; and document analysis, including school activity records, academic calendars, codes of conduct, and local curriculum materials.

Findings: The findings reveal that school leaders conceptualise local knowledge as a living system encompassing language, rituals, ecological knowledge, moral values, and community institutions. Leaders with cultural and linguistic proximity to the community build stronger trust, mediate conflicts more effectively, and involve elders and local knowledge holders in the decision-making processes. Local knowledge was integrated into the curriculum, school activities, and calendars through language instruction, cultural performances, ecological learning, and community participation. School leaders also play a critical advocacy role by translating cultural values into formal policies and negotiating with local governments. However, these efforts were constrained by examination-oriented schooling, limited resources, insufficient teacher training, language politics, inability to map local knowledge, and weak institutional support.

Conclusion: The study highlights culturally responsive leadership as relational, context-sensitive, and advocacy-driven, demonstrating how school leaders function as cultural agents and policy translators.

Novelty: This study provides one of the first empirical accounts of how the Indigenous Tamang community's cultural knowledge is mobilised through school leadership practices in Nepal, helping to bridge the gap between national policy rhetoric and local enactment.

Keywords: Culturally responsive school leadership, school policy and practice, local knowledge, Indigenous education, Nepal

Introduction

The discourse on educational leadership has shifted from a top-down, standardised model towards more context-sensitive and culturally responsive approaches. Recent conceptualisations of transformative leadership extend this shift by framing leadership as contextually adaptive, relational, and emergent rather than as a fixed set of traits or practices ([Hoppe & Namdar, 2024](#)). Within this context, school leadership has gained increased significance, as leaders play a central role in shaping school vision, values, and direction in alignment with local communities. Leadership, therefore, involves fostering a shared vision of change that is constructed and supported ([Mincu, 2022](#)). Given the cultural diversity within school communities, school leaders also require essential skills to effectively lead culturally diverse teams and work across different cultural perspectives to achieve institutional objectives ([Adams & Velarde, 2020](#)). School leadership should not be framed through a universalist and managerial lens focusing on accountability, instructional supervision, and standardisation; rather, it should be understood as context-sensitive and culturally responsive, particularly within culturally diverse and marginalised communities ([Khalifa et al., 2016](#); [Lumby & Foskett, 2011](#)). School leadership in this study includes headteachers, assistant headteachers, senior teachers, School Management Committee (SMC) chairpersons, and members of school subcommittees. Such leadership acknowledges and values the social and cultural backgrounds

of the students and communities, leveraging the local knowledge systems to foster positive change, sustain existing practices, support adaptation, and manage tensions between policy demands and local contexts in school policies and practices.

Local languages, knowledge systems, and worldviews have historically been marginalised among minority and Indigenous communities, creating barriers to their meaningful integration into schooling ([Da Silva et al., 2023](#)). Globally, attention is increasing on how school leaders can engage with community cultural assets to improve educational outcomes ([UNESCO, 2023](#); [Jumaah et al., 2026](#)). This change reflects a broader understanding of leadership as rooted in equity, cultural relevance and social accountability. There is a recognised need to move beyond superficially preserving Indigenous cultural identities towards culturally sustaining school education. However, in practice, the integration of local knowledge into educational leadership continues to face challenges, including a dominant education system that marginalises Indigenous knowledge, as well as resistance from teachers and authorities who question its relevance and parental choices over the local knowledge ([Da Silva et al., 2023](#); [Pherali, 2013](#)). In addition, inadequate policy implementation, limited culturally responsive resources, and insufficient teacher training have been identified as persistent challenges in enacting culturally responsive education.

Despite these challenges, school leadership can play a critical role in mobilising local knowledge and cultural diversity to bring about changes in school policy and practice. This is achieved through intentional efforts such as developing the school's vision and mission, modelling values, promoting inclusive programs, integrating cultural knowledge into the curriculum, creating a safe school environment, and supporting teachers' professional development. Internationally, several countries provide strong examples of culturally responsive leadership. In Russia, for instance, 20% of the curriculum is designed to address local ethnic and cultural needs, reflected in classroom decorations and student work while school leaders in Ireland and Spain are expected to provide training resources to ensure equity for diverse students ([Brown et al., 2021](#)). Similarly, in Malaysia, school leaders actively integrate local cultural, linguistic, religious, and ethnic knowledge into school policies and practices through shared missions, inclusive programmes, and curriculum development ([Adams & Velarde, 2020](#); [Kadir et al., 2022](#)).

In Nepal, education policies such as the School Sector Development Plan (SSDP) and the Education Act embraced inclusive and decentralised school governance to promote community participation and local autonomy. The Constitution of Nepal (2015) guarantees every citizen's right to education in their mother tongue, and the National Education Policy (2019) emphasises the integration of local knowledge systems and Indigenous practices into school curricula ([MoEST, 2019](#)). Similarly, since mid-2023, Nepal transitioned from the School Sector Development Plan (SSDP) to a ten-year School Education Sector Plan (SESP) with explicit policy emphasis on inclusive access, quality enhancement, decentralised governance, and contextualisation of curriculum at the local level ([MoEST, 2022](#)). However, the practical implementation of these policies and inclusive leadership at the school level in Nepali schools is limited. School leaders continue to function within hierarchical, bureaucratic,

and centralised structures that adhere to national standards rather than being responsive to local knowledge systems and contexts ([Pherali, 2013](#)). Indigenous communities possess rich knowledge systems in Nepal, which are often unrecognised and underutilised in school-level decision-making and curricula, or are tokenistically included. Recent scholarship highlights that decolonising education in Nepal requires embedding Indigenous knowledge and local epistemologies in curriculum and practice ([Syangtan et al., 2021](#)).

The southern part of Lalitpur District is home to the Tamang, Newar, and Magar Indigenous peoples ([Kunwar et al., 2024](#); [Gautam et al., 2023](#)), where public schools operate at the intersection of state policies and Indigenous lifeworlds ([Parajuli et al., 2019](#)). These communities possess distinctive rituals, oral histories, languages, and ecological knowledge, which are a valuable educational resources but receive little space within the modern school education system. Local school leaders (headteachers, assistant headteachers, school management committee (SMC) members, senior teachers, and local government education actors) are caught between the demand to meet policy requirements and the desire or pressure from the community to make education more culturally inclusive and meaningful. This shows that there is a gap in understanding how school leaders in diverse ethnicities or Indigenous majority areas, such as southern Lalitpur in Nepal, value, negotiate, and integrate local community knowledge into their leadership practices. While policies advocate for inclusive education and participatory governance, there is limited study on how these are practised at the school level, particularly in Indigenous/ethnically diverse communities. Therefore, this study was guided by the following research question: How do school leaders in public schools in the southern part of Lalitpur District, Nepal, recognise, value, and engage with local (Tamang) community knowledge, and how does this engagement shape school policies and everyday practices?

Study Site and Methods

This qualitative exploratory study was conducted in Konjyosom Rural Municipality (KRM), in the southern part of Lalitpur District, Nepal. The area is predominantly inhabited by the Tamang community, followed by the Newar and Magar Indigenous peoples, and is characterised by rich linguistic, cultural, and ecological knowledge systems embedded in everyday life. This setting provided a relevant context for exploring how school leaders engage with and respond to community-based knowledge within the formal education system, specifically in shaping school policy and practice.

For this study, four public secondary schools located in Nallu, Chaughare, Sankhu, and Dalchowki villages were purposively selected. To maintain anonymity, pseudonyms are used for these schools: Himal Secondary School (Nallu), Lali Gurans Secondary School (Chaughare), Machhapuchre Secondary School (Sankhu), and Gaurishankar Secondary School (Dalchowki). The schools were selected based on geographic accessibility and their involvement in the Model School Development initiative supported by the ECEC Innovation in Education organisation. These schools serve students from Tamang, Newar, Magar, and other communities. Situated within culturally diverse Indigenous settings, they operate at the

intersection of national education policies and local lifeworlds, thereby providing relevant sites for examining how school leadership negotiates policy imperatives alongside cultural responsiveness. Participants included headteachers, assistant headteachers, senior teachers, School Management Committee (SMC) chairpersons, and school subcommittee members involved in school leadership, decision-making, and governance. Selection was based on their roles and knowledge of both school operations and community engagement.

The study was informed by culturally responsive leadership theory ([Khalifa, 2020](#); [Ladson-Billings, 2014](#)), which provides a lens to examine how school leaders recognise, respect, and incorporate local cultural and epistemological assets of the communities in which they operate. This theory emphasises leadership practices that are committed to equity, cultural consciousness, and responsive pedagogy. In addition, the transformative leadership theory ([Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000](#); [Montuori & Donnelly, 2017](#)) was also used to analyse how school leaders act as agents of change, challenging dominant schooling norms and fostering locally sustaining educational environments. Together, these theoretical perspectives provide a framework for understanding the interplay between leadership, power, cultural identity, and school improvement.

Data were generated over an eight-month period between May and December 2025. In-depth interviews were conducted with 6 participants (2 headteachers, 1 assistant headteacher, 1 local curriculum teacher, 2 SMC chairpersons), lasting 50-90 minutes each. In addition, two sharing circles were conducted with eight teachers (4 participants in each group, with no participant repeated), which lasted 60-120 minutes. In total, the study involved 14 participants (10 males and 4 females). Interviews and sharing circles were conducted primarily in Nepali language and later translated into English for coding and analysis by the research team. Additional data sources included observations of the school activities and document analysis. Reviewed documents included school activity records, code of conduct, academic calendars, souvenirs, posters, and notice boards. These sources provided insights into how local knowledge systems were recognised, valued, and enacted through school leadership practices. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was reached, with no substantially new themes emerging from interviews and sharing circle sessions involving 14 participants. The meaning-making process followed a thematic approach involving transcription, iterative reading, and coding of interviews and field notes. Quirkos qualitative data analysis software was used to support coding and theme development. A coding framework was developed inductively and refined through engagement with the theoretical lenses. Themes related to the identification of local knowledge, culturally responsive leadership strategies, and institutional adaptation formed the focus of analysis. This process allowed our study to identify the factors that support and constrain the leadership practices of school actors working in Indigenous-majority settings. The Nepali authors' cultural and linguistic familiarity with the Tamang community facilitated trust, rapport, and contextual understanding, while the international author (Abraham de Muynck) contributed analytical distance and critical reflection in the research design, data interpretation and the writing process. Ethical standards were upheld through obtaining informed consent, maintaining participant and school anonymity, and

respecting participants' time, freedom to respond, and professional responsibilities. Research ethics for this study were reviewed and approved by the Research and Development Department of ECEC Innovation in Education.

Findings and Discussion

This section discusses four main themes of our analysis: first, how local knowledge is valued and recognised by the school leadership; second, how decisions are informed by the local culture and language cultural awareness; third, how cultural knowledge appears in curriculum, school activities, and community engagement; and fourth, how school leadership advocates local culture in policies. Thereafter, attention is paid to the barriers and tensions that are experienced and how schools are reimagined through local knowledge.

Recognition and Valuing of Local Knowledge in School Leadership

Participants conceptualised local knowledge as the lifeblood of community life, which is embedded in language, ecological practices, spiritual traditions and everyday ways of living. This understanding illustrates the interconnected nature of education, livelihoods, culture, and community identity within many Tamang communities ([Lama, 2022](#)). It was also evident during field observations, where cultural musical instruments, artefacts, and drawings were visibly presented. Participants described local knowledge as encompassing language, agricultural skills, livestock management, traditional medicine, seasonal knowledge, rituals, and local histories. For example, teachers in Machhapuchhre school explained that "our communities are skilled at mixed cropping, buffalo rearing, traditional healing practices, and participate in festivities of different ethnic groups, which are not only linked with livelihoods but also reflect our accumulated wisdom" (Sharing circle 1, Sankhu).

School leaders recognised the educational significance of cultural knowledge in shaping the identity and sense of belonging of students. A male headteacher from Gaurisankar School said, "our children must learn the history of our place, language, culture, and rituals; only then they know who they are". Similarly, another male teacher highlighted that "integrating such knowledge in teaching supports intergenerational transfer of values, identity, and cultural practices, while also making learning more relevant and meaningful". One female teacher elaborated, "engaging students in learning about local festivities, ceremonies, and farming practices fosters respect for cultural heritage, preserves traditional wisdom, appreciate cultural diversity, and connects school learning to everyday life (Sharing circle 2, Nallu)." In this regard, a female SMC chairperson of Laligurans school asserted, "local knowledge as skills that embedded in agriculture, weaving local carriage, milking from cow, animal husbandry and our ritual life". This perspective and the recognition of local cultural knowledge resonate with [Khalifa's \(2016\)](#) argument that culturally responsive leadership affirms students' heritage and identity, and connects school education to community contexts. The findings also reflect [Ladson-Billings' \(2014\)](#) notion of culturally relevant pedagogy that emphasises connecting school learning with students' lived cultural experiences, identities and community realities. In this regard, local knowledge was not treated as an additional cultural element but as an important foundation for meaningful and contextually grounded learning. Such recognition

informs leadership decisions related to curriculum adaptation, school programming, academic calendar, and teacher engagement, situating schools as sites for sustaining local knowledge systems rather than merely transmitting standardised learning content.

Local knowledge was also framed as a moral economy grounded in reciprocity and collective responsibility. A male assistant headteacher shared the traditional system of *sramdan* (voluntary labour contribution), which is declining, yet school leaders are making an effort to revitalise it through collaborative school-community projects such as cultural programs, infrastructure improvement, and environmental conservation activities. One male teacher described, "we remind our students that *sramdan* practices historically shaped the community and hold importance in building this village" (Sharing circle 1, Sankhu). This demonstrates that school leadership extends beyond an administrative role to include cultural stewardship, involving ethical engagement with local community values, practices, and relationships.

Leadership Grounded in Local Culture and Language

Participants repeatedly emphasised that the effectiveness of leadership depends on the extent to which school leaders engage with the local language and local cultural practices. One male non-local teacher in Machhapuchhre school shared, "our headteacher can speak the Tamang language that helps parents to share the problems and mutually solve the issues, which is difficult for us due to differences in cultures and language." Similarly, a female SMC chairperson of Laligurans school added, "as I represent a local Tamang community, parents, children and school teachers can easily share their feelings, challenges and learning experiences in our mother tongue."

These accounts suggest that school leaders with linguistic and cultural proximity are effective in building trust, conflict resolution, and responsiveness to community concerns. This was also observed during school visits, where interactions between school leaders, community members, and students occur in the local Tamang language, fostering a sense of familiarity and trust. Extending this perspective, the male headteacher of the Himal school explained, "when decisions relate to culture or social matters, I consult Tamang village elders, particularly the *Tamba* (historian/orator) and *Bombo* (Shamanic healer), as their wisdom will help me to deal with difficult issues and decisions that are culturally appropriate." This demonstrates that leadership grounded in local cultural knowledge involves relational and consultative practices, where community elders are positioned as legitimate knowledge holders and active partners in decision-making processes. This aligns with a relationship-based approach that emphasise trust and collective engagement in the Tamang community ([Tatsumi & Tamang, 2025](#)).

The ability to communicate in the local language was identified as one important factor to promote inclusion and foster relational trust, even among non-local leaders. In Chaughare village, a male local curriculum teacher from Himal school explained, "although our headteacher is not Tamang, he communicates in the Tamang language, using humour that makes everyone participate and attentive in the meeting." This indicates language is not just a form of communication but a symbolic resource that signals respect, sense of belonging, and cultural closeness. Such practices resemble [Leithwood and Jantzi's \(2000\)](#) emphasis on leadership that builds relational trust and shared meaning. The findings suggest that language

fosters belonging, participation and trust within the school community, reflecting culturally relevant education that values students' linguistic identities ([Ladson-Billings, 2014](#)). Overall, these findings highlight that culturally and linguistically responsive leadership enhances strong school-community relationships and supports more contextually rooted decision-making.

Cultural Knowledge in Curriculum, School Activities, and Community Engagement

The integration of local community cultural knowledge in schools was evident in both formal and informal learning practices. In this study, formal learning refers to structured, school-based processes such as curriculum delivery, classroom instruction, and assessment, while informal learning refers to knowledge generated through community engagement, cultural practice, and everyday lived experiences. Within formal learning, language emerges as a central medium for integrating local knowledge. Three of the four schools included in this study have introduced teaching the Tamang language in the early grades as part of the mother tongue-based multi-lingual education (MTB-MLE). Teachers were also found to encourage reflective writing on festivals and local cultural rituals and events. For instance, a male Nepali language teacher from Machhapuchhre school shared, "after festival holidays, I ask my students to write about what they learnt from their celebrations, including their observations, lessons from elders, and personal reflection (Sharing circle 1, Sankhu)." Such reflective assignments enable students to connect classroom learning with their lived cultural experiences, enacting what [Brown et al. \(2021\)](#) describe as contextual learning and culturally relevant pedagogy that values students' cultural identities and community knowledge ([Ladson-Billings, 2014](#)).

At the intersection of formal and informal practices, school leaders were found to draw on cultural knowledge to support ecological learning grounded in local environmental knowledge and practices and the localisation of curriculum. In Dalchowki, the headteacher of the Gaurisankar school explained that students are encouraged to visit the nearby forest to identify local herbs, animals, and birds, and then interview a village Magar priest (Masto Pujari) about their ritual and cultural uses. The male headteacher noted, "we ask students to write short reports and share them in class. Students feel proud when elders praise them for recognising that plants hold cultural values in their community." Furthermore, a female SMC chairperson expressed, "students can participate in local rituals and traditional pooja (worship) in the village and prepare learning reports so that this knowledge can be transferred to the next generation". These examples illustrate how school leaders translate national policy mandates for curriculum localisation into tangible classroom practices, reflecting [UNESCO's \(2023\)](#) call for an education system that "learns from the community as much as they teach it." However, the integration of local curriculum remains challenging. Although the Rural Municipality and schools have developed a local curriculum up to grade 8, teaching materials are available for only up to grade 3, with no resources provided for grades 4 to 8. This gap between policy intent and available resources (learning material and teachers) highlights the limited capacity of local schools to fully implement the national education curriculum reforms. In this context, the creativity of school leaders and teachers is crucial for addressing systematic constraints through pedagogical innovation and resilience, reflecting elements of transformative leadership.

School Management Committees (SMCs), teachers, parents, and community leaders were found actively engaged in local curriculum development through shared decision-making. In Nallu, one male teacher from Himal school recalled, "we sat with village elders and the SMC to decide which local cultural activities to include in our local curriculum (Sharing Circle 2, Nallu)." In Magargaun, Machhapuchhre school further institutionalised cultural participation by establishing seventeen school subcommittees that include extracurricular and cultural departments and a student-parents coordination committee. In Nallu, students and community members also formed a group to learn and perform *Jhakri Nach* (traditional ritualistic dance performed by spiritual healers) for cultural programs and inter-school events. Reflecting on this practice, the headteacher of the Himal school shared that during the Presidential Running Shield Volleyball Tournament in 2024, his students performed *Jhakri Nach* because it was the strength of the village and the school. He noted, "performance was highly appreciated by many. Our cultural knowledge and skills enabled us to lead this activity." This example mirrors [Adams and Velarde's \(2020\)](#) notion of inclusive leadership that models how locally grounded cultural knowledge is mobilised not only for classroom learning but also for leadership, school visibility, and community pride. Interviews and sharing circles conducted during the study also raised teachers' awareness of the potential of local culture as a driver of change within the school. Teachers in two schools expressed a commitment to invite local farmers to teach agricultural knowledge and priests to explain ritual practices, noting that this could enable students to learn more than through a textbook alone. Participants further emphasised that student-parent coordination committees and Parents' Teacher Associations (PTAs) can play a better role in connecting schools with community knowledge holders. Such partnerships and networking can strengthen school and community relationships, enhance quality education, and contribute to the preservation of cultural values and practices ([Sanjel, 2025](#)). These collaborative practices position communities as co-educators and knowledge holders, reflecting a culturally sustaining and decolonising approach that legitimise Indigenous and community cultural knowledge in school education ([Paris & Alim, 2017](#); [Syangtan et al., 2021](#))

Another visible form of integration of local knowledge was reflected in school wall magazines published by the language, literature, and magazine committee of the school, and souvenirs (commemorative publications) also reflected the inclusion of the local language and cultural knowledge. These publications featured local proverbs, stories, experience of the elders and former teachers. Similarly, document analysis of school calendars and teachers' duty allocations showed that both local and national cultural events were explicitly included. These practices not only preserving and disseminate local knowledge but also shape school activities, leadership practices, publications, and institutional culture, drawing on the wisdom of community leaders, former teachers, and the richness of local stories, proverbs, and local traditions.

School Leadership in Advocating for Local Culture and Translating it into Policy

One of the most significant findings of the study concerns the advocacy role of school leaders in advancing culturally responsive schools to meet community expectations within governmental frameworks. In Dalchowki, leaders of Gaurisankar school lobbied for five days

of municipal holidays to celebrate and respect local festivals. The male headteacher of the same school recalled, "at first, the rural municipality reduced the number of days allocated for local cultural-festival holidays, but we advocated that culture is part of education and the policy was later revised." Our observation and document analysis of school offices showed that codes of conduct were displayed stating that teachers must "respect local language, religion and culture." However, one headteacher noted that they participated in developing a code of conduct with the support of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and he expressed a desire to make it more relevant to the local cultural context. These endeavours demonstrate how school leaders translate cultural awareness and knowledge into formal policy instruments, aligning with what [Leithwood and Jantzi \(2000\)](#) describe as transformational alignment, in which organisational structures mirror shared values.

The SMC and school leaders jointly advocated for the inclusion of local socio-cultural and historical knowledge, as well as the promotion of local tourism, in the design of the local curriculum. A male local curriculum teacher from Himal school shared, "our SMCs and school headteachers have already recorded minutes and are advocating to include local socio-cultural and historical knowledge at the Rural Municipality. We hope it will be implemented soon." A male SMC chairperson of Gaurisankar school emphasised that "students can learn the local traditions, historical places, traditional livelihoods and practice more deeply if the school involves local experts (knowledge holders) in the community event and function." Similarly, a headteacher in Machhapuchhre explained, "our local socio-cultural knowledge has influenced and developed a locally suitable academic calendar and supported our advocacy effort for a local curriculum and teaching material development for grades 6-8."

These efforts by the schools respond to the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2076 for school education in Nepal and Local Curriculum Development and Implementation Guideline 2076, both of which empower local governments to develop and implement curricula that incorporate local knowledge, skills, and occupations, making education relevant in the local context ([MoEST, 2019](#); [MoEST, 2019b](#)). To operationalise this national framework and guideline, the municipality and schools introduced *Hamro Konjyosom (Our Konjyosom)*, which explicitly includes contents related to local cultural knowledge such as Tamang language instruction, heritage and cultural practices, traditional skills and occupations, local technologies, territorial knowledge, and cultural values ([Konjyosom Rural Municipality, 2024](#)). These examples demonstrate the ways school leaders serve as both advocates and policy translators, ensuring that local cultural knowledge is recognised, institutionalised, and made functional within the school education framework.

Barriers and Tensions in Enacting Culturally Responsive Leadership

Despite the readiness and strong commitment of school leaders and teachers to value the cultural knowledge of the community, the study has revealed barriers and tensions that complicate the enactment of culturally responsive leadership. These challenges are structural and systematic constraints identified within the study context.

A central barrier identified by the participating teachers is the lack of systematic mapping of local knowledge and limited leadership capacity to translate such knowledge into

school policy and practice. A male teacher recognised the importance of local knowledge but emphasised uncertainty about its implementation, stating, "we know local knowledge is important, but we have not mapped it properly. Therefore, we are unsure of where and how it should be included in our plans, policies, and classroom activities (Sharing circle 1, Sankhu)". Additionally, another teacher admitted that "most teachers are not trained to map or integrate local knowledge. This indicates a gap between recognition of local cultural knowledge and practical implementation capacity. Even school leaders do not really understand how to do it." In such cases, as suggested by [Khalifa \(2020\)](#) and [Ravet and Mtika \(2024\)](#), knowledge audits, curriculum alignment, leadership development, teachers' professional training, and institutional guidance should be provided to avoid fragmented implementation and inconsistency.

Another tension lies in the examination-oriented schooling that marginalises culturally grounded and experiential learning. Teachers expressed a disconnection between teachers' professional training ideals and everyday classroom practice in school. One female teacher shared, "we learned the importance of holistic child development in the training, but in practice, we focus too much on exams (Sharing circle 1, Sankhu)." Similarly, the tension between the school calendar and agricultural seasonal cycles further illustrates the challenges of enacting culturally responsive leadership within formal schooling structures. An agriculture teacher explained that months of Chaitra-Baisakh (March/April), a critical period for soil preparation and agricultural activities, often coincides with school examinations. As a result, students enrolled in agriculture-related studies are unable to participate in important experiential learning opportunities within their households and communities, compelling families to rely on hired labour. This reflects a misalignment between formal education structures and local livelihood practices. The challenges reported by participants reflect broader tensions between Indigenous knowledge systems and Western-oriented curriculum structures that continue to shape schooling in Nepal ([Koirala, 2023](#)). From the perspective of culturally relevant and culturally sustaining education, these tensions show how exam-oriented schooling marginalises experiential, place-based, and Indigenous forms of learning ([Ladson-Billing, 2014](#); [Paris & Alim, 2017](#)). Consequently, school leaders are required to navigate national accountability demands while incorporating local knowledge and cultural practices. This finding echoes the argument of [Shizha \(2014\)](#), [Preston and Claypool \(2021\)](#), and [Dhakal \(2025\)](#), who argue that standardised assessment practice often undermines place-based and local knowledge systems. [Lopez \(2016\)](#) further notes that defining academic success solely by examination performance limits culturally responsive leadership, as leaders are compelled to prioritise compliance over contextual relevance.

Language is another complex and contested aspect of culturally responsive leadership. While some schools successfully introduced Tamang language instruction, others hesitated due to concerns about equity, affordability, and community politics. A male headteacher of the Gaurisankar school shared, "if we introduce one community's language, others may demand the same, and we may not be able to manage resources." Similarly, the language and local curriculum male teacher from Laligurans school shared that disagreement over the appropriate script of the Tamang language intensified tensions as some prefer the Sambhota script while

others want the Tamyig script (Sambhota is derived from the Tibetan script; Tamyig is an Indigenous Tamang script). "We had to consult Lama, Bombo, elders, parents and even submit a petition," he noted. These findings resonate with scholarship emphasising that language policy is deeply political and closely tied to identity, recognition, and power, particularly in Indigenous language education contexts ([Phyak, 2021](#)). Therefore, school leaders and teachers are required to support linguistic inclusion, navigate competing cultural claims, and maintain social cohesion. These findings show that culturally sustaining leadership involves ongoing negotiations over language, identity, representation and equity within diverse communities.

Participants also highlighted resource constraints, migration, and structural limitations. At the Himat school, the male teacher shared, "we have the curriculum for local culture, historical places, but we don't have textbooks or enough materials. The budget is too small to recruit a qualified teacher." Migration and demographic change further compounded these challenges. A teacher from Laligurans school shared, "many educated people have moved to the city. Students' enrolment is going down, and we don't have enough skilled teachers left." These conditions illustrate limitations that undermine the sustainability of culturally responsive initiatives. This suggests that greater investment in resources, staffing, training, and institutional support is strongly required to sustain the commitment of school leaders towards culturally responsive leadership ([Jumaah et al., 2026](#); [Mansfield, 2024](#)). The absence of such support limits leaders in implementing local cultural knowledge into school policy and practice.

It was also observed that the students were made to recite *Saraswati Bandana* (a prayer to the Hindu goddess of knowledge) in the school assembly every morning. In this regard, one male SMC chairperson shared, "it has been a long-standing practice. The school does not force the students to chant the prayer, but some parents have complained about it." This practice reflects the dominance of a particular cultural tradition, which excludes the cultural expression of local or other communities. It was found that the majority of teachers, the headteacher, and the chairperson of the school were non-Tamang, while the majority of students and parents were Tamang in that locality. This mismatch highlights the need for greater cultural sensitivity and representation balance in school leadership. Therefore, there is a need for increased awareness, teacher professional development, and training to understand the value of local cultural knowledge and make a more inclusive teaching-learning space built on trust and relationships among students, parents, teachers, and the community.

Reimagining Schools Through Local Knowledge

Participants articulated a strong and hopeful vision for transforming school leadership through the deeper integration of community cultural knowledge. This future vision reflects a shift toward relational, place-based, and community-centred leadership. In particular, participants expressed a clear desire to move beyond solely informal practices and to embed local knowledge more systematically within the formal school governance structures. A male school leader from Machhapuchhre school stated, "we are committed to presenting the agenda of mapping and integrating local knowledge in our School Management Committee and Teachers' meeting, as today's discussion was more inspirational." Such statement suggests that

the research process itself can encourage reflections and actions among participants, and indicate growing awareness of the importance of culturally responsive leadership and the need for its institutionalisation within schools.

A prominent future aspiration was to involve community knowledge holders directly in teaching and learning beyond school walls. For instance, a male agriculture teacher at Machhapuchhre school shared, "I want to invite local farmers to share their experiences or even teach practical lessons in the field." Similarly, other teachers proposed inviting village cooperative leaders, local professionals, priests, and community elders to connect classroom learning with real-life application. Supporting this idea, a male official from the Rural Municipality emphasised this vision by saying, "there are no restrictions from the Konjyosom Rural Municipality. The key is to identify and map local resource persons and make them feel ownership of their schools in the particular community." This vision aligns with culturally sustaining pedagogy and leadership that emphasises repositioning communities as co-educators rather than passive stakeholders ([Paris & Alim, 2017](#); [Bang et al., 2012](#)). This way, the approach promotes the epistemic value of local knowledge and brings justice by legitimising it within formal education.

School leaders also articulated a transformative vision that links cultural knowledge with economic sustainability. For example, the male headteacher of Gaurisankar school stated, "I want to implement 'earn while you study' activities. If we connect local cultures, historic and religious places, and the local skills like Namlo, Basket-weaving with income generation, it will help retain students in our schools by reducing student dropout." Similarly, the female SMC chairperson of Laligurans school shared, "I have a vision to make my local school better in terms of learning outcomes. I would expect learnings to link with the local community, culture and occupation, aiming to reduce migration from our village to the city." This statement demonstrates her strong attachment to the school and commitment to improving it through culturally grounded leadership. Together, these perspectives resonate with recent discussions on education for sustainable development, which advocate for curricula that prepare students to thrive within their local socio-economic contexts rather than solely for urban or global labour markets ([UNESCO, 2021](#); [Chowdhury & Alzarrad, 2025](#)).

Cultural continuity, belongingness, and pride were also central to participants' vision for the future. One male teacher at Himal school expressed, "our dream is that our students will not forget our *Damphu*, *Madal* and *Jhakri Nach* (Folk musical instruments and traditional dance)." Reinforcing this point, the male school headteacher also highlighted the importance of consulting cultural authorities, "when I need to make decisions about culture and other school and community activities, I consult with *Tamba* and *Bombo*. Without them, I cannot move ahead." These findings support scholarship on school leadership that frames culturally responsive leadership as relational, ethical, and community-accountable, rooted in respect for local authority and cultural continuity ([Khalifa, 2020](#); [Shields, 2024](#)). Collectively, these aspirations demonstrate that school leaders seek not only culturally responsive leadership but also economically and socially sustainable approaches. In this perspective, schools are

envisioned as important spaces for local knowledge preservation, community engagement, and holistic student development.

Concluding Remarks

This study provides one of the first empirical accounts of how the Tamang community's cultural knowledge is mobilised through culturally responsive school leadership to shape school policy, curriculum, and everyday practices in Indigenous-majority settings. In southern Lalitpur District of Nepal, school leaders who valued local language, cultural traditions, ecological knowledge, and moral systems fostered trust, inclusion, and shared ownership of schooling. Importantly, the findings suggest that culturally responsive school leadership progresses from recognising local cultural knowledge to actively engaging community knowledge holders and ultimately institutionalising this knowledge through school policies and practices. These actions extend beyond symbolic recognition of culture, such as acknowledging diversity in discourse or policy statements, to institutional practices, including mother tongue-based multi-lingual education (MTB-MLE), curriculum localisation, culturally responsive school calendars, community participation, and policy advocacy at the municipal level. However, persistent structural and systemic barriers, including linguistic dominance, examination-driven systems, limited institutional support for local curriculum implementation, inadequate resources, and insufficient professional development for teachers, continue to constrain the enactment of culturally responsive leadership and contribute to the continued marginalisation of local knowledge within formal schooling. These challenges position school leaders as mediators navigating competing demands between national policy compliance and community expectations. The findings underscore that culturally responsive leadership should be understood not merely as an individual disposition but as a relational, ethical, and political practice requiring institutional support. In terms of policy and practice, the study highlights the need for systematic mapping of local knowledge, targeted leadership and teacher training, formative assessment practices, and stronger policy alignment that legitimises community knowledge systems. Future comparative research across Indigenous communities in Nepal and longitudinal studies examining how culturally responsive leadership evolves and influences student outcomes (academic, cultural, and social) would further strengthen the evidence base for culturally responsive leadership in Nepal.

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