



School Leadership in Remote Areas of Bhutan: Some Insights from the Land of the Thunder Dragon

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Based on the premise that leadership needs to be understood within the context in which it is exercised, the study reported here aimed to develop an understanding of leadership at the primary school level in remote regions in Bhutan. In particular, it investigated the current concerns faced by primary school leaders and the strategies adopted by them in order to deal with those concerns. The theoretical underpinning of the study was interpretivism, employing qualitative methods of data collection including semi-structured interviews, and unstructured non-participant observations. The choice of schools and participants was made according to maximum variation and purposive selection. The participants comprised principals and teachers who chaired school committees. Data were analysed using grounded theory methods of data analysis, specifically the use of constant comparison through open coding. The current concerns that the primary school leaders contend they encounter were classified into three main categories ; ‘concerns relating to the environment’, ‘concerns related to teaching’, and ‘concerns related to administration.’ In addition, a range of strategies pursued by school leaders to deal with their concerns were revealed. The results of the study are pertinent to the literature and future research on educational leadership. They also have implications for policy and practice, especially in regard to the preparation, development, and support of school leaders and teachers in Bhutan, as well as in other developing countries.

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Introduction

Based on the premise that leadership needs to be understood within the context in which it is exercised, the study reported here aimed to develop an understanding of leadership at the primary school level in remote regions in Bhutan. In particular, it investigated the current concerns faced by primary school leaders and the strategies adopted by them in order to deal with those concerns. The theoretical underpinning of the study was interpretivism, employing qualitative methods of data collection including semi-structured interviews, and unstructured non-participant observations. The choice of schools and participants was made according to maximum variation and purposive selection. The participants comprised principals and teachers who chaired school committees. Data were analysed using grounded theory methods of data analysis, specifically the use of constant comparison through open coding. The current concerns that the primary school leaders contend they encounter were classified into three main categories ; ‘concerns relating to the environment’, ‘concerns related to teaching’, and ‘concerns related to administration.’ In addition, a range of strategies pursued by school leaders to deal with their concerns were revealed. The results of the study are pertinent to the literature and future research on educational leadership. They also have implications for policy and practice, especially in regard to the preparation, development, and support of school leaders and teachers in Bhutan, as well as in other developing countries.

The position detailed above was summarised by Bridges in 2007 in relation to education in a variety of spheres when he argued that one cannot treat local and national decisions as if they have exactly the same requirements. In arguing thus he was contesting those policymakers who tend to assume “best possible environments for implementation”: ideal buildings, students and teachers and even resources’ (Braun et al., 2011, p. 585). Because we are of like mind we have concentrated our research on school leadership over the last decade on seeking insights regarding the nexus between leadership and context as it applies to schools and their broader environments.

In recent years, a number of research projects conducted under the aegis of the Graduate School of Education have concentrated on leadership activity at the school level in very challenging circumstances in order to capture the day-to-day reality of what is involved. For this purpose, the value of adopting an interpretative approach to these investigations has become apparent because it provides a most conducive way of revealing lived experiences of situationally embedded real world actors, while at the same time it is also recognised that no attempt at capturing a range of contextual factors can ever be exhaustive. Furthermore, the interpretive approach lends itself to representing perceived reality more faithfully and fully than what may be achieved using quantifying and abstruse techniques like those that have tended to be prevalent in the field of educational leadership and management.

This paper details the results of a research project based on this central position. Underpinning it is a view that one way of impressing its importance is to provide accounts of 'extreme' cases. Some examples of what is meant by that relate to schools in isolated communities in the Australian outback, in post conflict situations, and in communities astride and straggling political borders. Here, another extreme situation is considered, namely that of remote schools in developing countries. The particular case that is reported relates to the concerns of primary school leaders working in remote schools in Bhutan. For this purpose, concerns are understood to be matters of importance to people that have an effect on them in their everyday lives.

The paper is divided into three main sections. First, the emergence of the education system in Bhutan is briefly chronicled. This is followed by a description of the nature of the study before detailing the main concerns that the participants in the study perceived they encounter in their day-to-day work.

Bhutan and its Education System

Bhutan, occupies an area of approximately 38,394 square kilometres. It is located between China and India and has a total

population of 735,553 (National Statistics Bureau, 2018). It is a country that prioritizes gross national happiness over gross national product and is currently experiencing modernization and decentralization. Bhutan has been ruled under a monarchy since 1907 (Phuntsho, 2013), although in 2008, the Fourth King of Bhutan changed the form of national government from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy (Phuntsho, 2013).

The first modern school in the country was established in 1914 by teachers from a Church of Scotland mission. By 1961, there were 11 schools with 400 students (Wangmo & Choden, 2011). By 2018 those figures stood at 880 and 188,743 respectively (Ministry of Education, 2018a).

The country's investment in economic development commenced in 1961 (Wangmo & Choden, 2011). Basic infrastructure facilities, including roads, power, communication systems, transport, agriculture and animal husbandry were established. Concurrently, basic education was oriented towards the growth of 'human resources' for sustainable economic development (Tashi, 2013), the school curriculum was borrowed from India, and English became the medium of instruction (Tashi, 2013).

Bhutan's development in all sectors has been guided by the philosophy of Gross National Happiness (GNH), first pronounced by the fourth king, Jigme Singye Wangchuck in 1972 when he announced that his country's success would be measured by GNH rather than by Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Since the late 1980s the concept of GNH has been used in economic development policy documents to ensure harmony with the national culture, institutions and spiritual values (Ura & Galay, 2004). The importance of this was impressed as follows by the current king, Jigme Khesar Namgyal Wangchuck in 2009:

Thus, for my nation, today GNH is the bridge between the fundamental values of kindness, equality and humanity and the necessary pursuit of economic growth. It

ensures that no matter what our nation may seek to achieve, the human dimension, the individual's place in the nation, is never forgotten. It is a constant reminder that we must strive for a caring leadership so that as the world and country changes, as our nation's goals change, our foremost priority will always remain the happiness and wellbeing of our people including the generations to come after us. (Gordon, 2013, p. 287)

GNH consists of four pillars, namely good governance, environmental conservation, sustainable and equitable socioeconomic development, and preservation and promotion of culture. The associated nine domains consist of time use, living standards, good governance, psychological well-being, community vitality, culture, health, education, and ecology (Heinberg, 2011). GNH guides not only the country's development policies, but also the education system.

Currently the school education structure comprises 11 years of free basic education from pre-primary level to grade ten-level. This includes seven years of primary school education (pre-primary to grade six) and four years of secondary school education (grade seven to grade ten). At the end of grade ten, a National Board examination is held that determines whether a student should continue to higher secondary school education (grade 11 and grade 12), undergo vocational training, or enter the job market (Ministry of Education, 2018). Students who can afford to do so can continue their higher secondary school education in private schools both within and outside the country.

Since 2016, changes have taken place in curricula, instruction and teacher development, especially following the publication of the Bhutan Education Blueprint - Rethinking Education (2014-2024) (Ministry of Education, 2014a). Various stakeholders at different levels of government are responsible for implementing the policy central to it, with school leaders seen to have a vital role to play in the process (Ministry of Education, 2014a). Not much, however, is understood about the background to the ways in which key stakeholders at the school level are implementing changes in

Bhutanese schools and the circumstances in which they work. Drukpa (2009) conducted a study on the key elements of effective principal leadership in primary and lower secondary schools in the country, and Dema (2017) undertook research on female education leaders in Bhutan. Current concerns of school leaders in Bhutan, and particularly of primary school leaders who are the central consideration of this paper, however, have received very little attention.

The Study

Five main contexts can be identified within Bhutan: ‘urban’, ‘semi-urban’, ‘rural’, ‘difficult’ and ‘remote’ (Ministry of Education, 2016). What characterizes the latter context, which it will be recalled is the focus of this paper, is the distinctively challenging circumstances that exist attributable to climate, isolation, transport, and the communication system. The study being reported that was undertaken within this context was aimed at generating understandings of current issues of concern for primary school leaders in Bhutan encountering challenging circumstances both geographically and demographically.

Schools that met a number of criteria were deemed to be located in rural and isolated areas. They were as follows: situated in an area of low socio-economic status; a long way from District Education Offices; lacking access to a market, a hospital, telecommunications, and housing; having erratic access to electricity; connected by farm roads only; two or more days’ walk from the nearest sealed road. Six schools that met those criteria were selected in a purposive manner (Punch, 2009) to ensure that different geographical locations and topography were represented. This meant that the study was conducted at two schools from the eastern district in Bhutan, at two from the western district, and at two from the central district.

A semi-structured interview approach, that is consistent with the study’s interpretivist orientation, was chosen as the principal data gathering method. The interviews were conducted with all

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principals, deputy-principals, teachers and school committee members attached to each school. Three of the schools had between 50 and 100 enrolled pupils and the other three had between 100 and 150 enrolled pupils. Because of the desire to investigate the issues that were of concern to the participants rather than to the researchers, the interview questions were flexibly worded and not highly structured (Merriam, 2009). Flexibility included being responsive to what participants said and following up interesting points, varying the order of questions, following up leads, and clearing up inconsistencies in answers (Bryman, 2013).

The questions detailed below, which were further broken down into conversation questions, guided data collection.

Central Research Question	Guiding Questions
What issues are currently of concern to primary school leaders in remote schools in Bhutan, and how do they deal with them?	What aims do school leaders have in performing their work? What reasons do they give for having these aims? What challenges do they face in trying to realize their aims?
	What are the strategies that school leaders employ in trying to realize their aims? What reasons do they give for the strategies they employ? What challenges do they face in employing them?
	What significance do the school leaders attach to their aims and strategies? What reasons do they give for their position on this? What challenges do they face in trying to maintain this position?
	What outcomes do the school leaders expect from pursuing their aims and strategies? What reasons do they give for

	expecting these outcomes? What challenges do they face in trying to realize them?
	What is the nature of the context within which the school leaders work which influences them in their work and which presents them with challenges?

The following is an example of some of the conversation questions deduced from the first guiding question:

Guiding Question	Examples of Questions from the Initial <i>Aide-memoire</i>
What aims do school leaders have in performing their work? What reasons do they give for having these aims? What challenges do they face in trying to realize their aims?	What do school leaders want to achieve when they perform their work?
	What personal and organisational reasons do they give for having these aims?
	What internal and external challenges do they face in trying to realise their aims?

The guiding questions were not seen as being specific questions to be answered. Rather, they were broad questions deemed to have the greatest potential to generate data pertinent to the central areas of interest.

Grounded theory approaches to data analysis were used aimed directly at generating theory from empirical data (Oktay, 2012). To that end, the researcher began data collection and analysis

simultaneously (Creswell, 2013). This process continued until ‘saturation’ in the generation of key themes was reached (O’Donoghue, 2019).

Results

In this section the concerns identified by participants as being significant for them are considered. They are classified into three groups; ‘concerns relating to the environment’, ‘concerns related to teaching’, and ‘concerns related to administration.’

Concerns Relating to the Environment

My name is Jigme. This primary school is in one of the remotest regions in Bhutan, having an area of 867.7 kilometres. It lies at an altitude of 3400 to 3500 metres above sea level. The people living here are semi-nomadic highlanders. It is a very beautiful place with an abundance of flora and fauna. This attracts a lot of visitors here. I love the rhododendrons in colours of white and red that grow all around this place.

Even in spring, however, the weather is cold, foggy and rainy. Without a four-wheel drive vehicle, it is difficult to get here because of the ice and mud. There is no public transport, nor communication facilities available in times of emergency. The nomads and civil servants working here often have to either walk or go on horseback when they travel around on business.

The mobile phone network is also limited and sometimes we cannot even make a call. Our school is located just below the slope before reaching the cluster of houses in this village. The road to school is slippery and muddy as there is no proper footpath. So, we have to be careful while walking to school, otherwise there is every chance that we might fall over. Many parents of our students are highlanders and semi-nomadic. They earn their living by raising yaks.

The six schools investigated were located in remote places similar to the one depicted above. Moreover, leaders situated there experience a range of such concerns related to the environment like those identified by Jigme. These are now examined in relation to climate, transportation and communication, and difficulties in making a living locally.

Concerns about climate. The six schools investigated are located at an altitude of between 1,040 metres to 2,690 metres. Because of the harsh weather conditions throughout most of the year, teaching commences late in the morning and finishes early in the afternoon. As a result, teachers find it difficult to cover the prescribed curriculum in the prescribed time.

It would be incorrect, however, to give the impression that none of the principals and teachers see that there are advantages associated with their circumstances, especially at the time of the year when the climate is favourable. One principal, in fact, depicted his situation in rather idyllic terms

My name is Wangchuk. This primary school was established in 1968. We have seven teachers including the principal and 115 students. Our school is a boarding school supported by the government. The day-scholars get food at school because of assistance from the World Food Programme. As long as you are healthy and fit, it is a blessing in disguise to work in this remote place. We get fresh organic vegetables and fruit from the villagers and we also have kitchen gardens of our own. The air and water here are not polluted like in the urban areas. We have a small population and natural resources are in abundance. We have a wildlife sanctuary near us and we can use that for teaching our students about nature. There are also a lot of beautiful waterfalls and butterflies around us.

In similar vein, another stated: “we cannot just stand and stare at our problems. We have to find ways to address the challenges in order to make it more attractive to live in this beautiful place.”

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Some principals contend that one way in which they address the climatic and physical environment-related challenges they face is by engaging in dialogue with relevant stakeholders, including members of the school community. One school leader from a remote eastern school reflected on his experience in this regard as follows:

This school was built in 1991. It was constructed by the community. It was a community primary school and was later upgraded to a primary school. The community contributed the labour. Now the government maintains it, but parents still feel it is their school. Staff accommodation is provided in the school and the community is proud in helping to provide support for this accommodation.

At another school it was reported that community members helped to build footpaths, cement the floor of the principal's quarter, and renovate the staff quarters for four families. A principal at a different school stated that parents come and help "during school cleaning campaigns."

Other principals also see the benefits of harnessing such cooperation to more specific classroom-related ends. This comment is indicative:

Whenever we have school functions we invite the local village leaders and parents as guests. Not only that, when we need experts to give talks on special topics we invite them to our school. When we want to give religious talks to students and for our school rituals we invite the local monks to perform them. Likewise, when we have to give talks related to health we invite the health officer in-charge in our community to do that. The agriculture extension officer is invited if we need advice on our school agriculture programme.

"The people here", he concluded, "not only provide their subject expertise but also give support in terms of resources available in their sector."

Concerns about transportation and communication. All of the remote schools visited are far removed from the nation's modern transport and communication systems. They are connected by farm roads that are often washed away by floods, covered by landslides, and affected by black ice. Many students and teachers in the areas in question also have to travel long distances to obtain their basic provisions and have health checks. Such travel can be particularly arduous for those having to attend official meetings and professional development activities in central locations. Event information from headquarters arriving too late because of transport difficulties can also result in teachers being deprived of opportunities to engage in professional learning.

One of the principals interviewed stated that in “summertime all roads are blocked. Once, I even had to eat rice infested with worms as no food could get through because of roads being blocked - the whole district was cut off”. At another location a principal and teachers described their experience regarding the previous year, recalling that during the summer the stream nearby flooded and students who were sick had to be carried on the backs of adults to hospital as no other mode of transportation could be utilized. Moreover, some places still have no mobile network coverage. Thus, the hardware technology that some teachers possess cannot be harnessed to assist in teaching. In addition, frequent power outages can hamper the work of teachers and students in using whatever ICT may be available to them.

Concerns about difficulties in making a living locally. The majority of parents in the school communities visited cannot read or write. They farm the land and raise cattle. In harsh weather some take their cattle to places where agricultural conditions are more favourable and others look at alternative employment opportunities. As a result, children stay behind during the school year either on their own or with grandparents. They also have to do a lot of their own cooking and washing. On this matter, one concerned principal stated: “Parents leave for pasture lands and have to walk for three days. During the school session in June, July and August they do stay with their kids and perform various rituals with them. But then

in April, May, September, October and November the children have to live on their own”.

Concerns about teaching

My name is Karma. I have been working in this school for the last 12 years as an agriculture focal person, in charge of stationery, housemaster and officiating principal. We have three regular teachers along with the current principal and five regular contract teachers who were recruited by the government for two years' work. At present, we have 150 students.

Our school is a day school from pre-primary to grade six. We are able to serve breakfast and lunch to our students because of assistance we get through the World Food Programme.

It is very difficult to shoulder both teaching responsibilities and administrative responsibilities at the same time. I often miss classes, as I have to attend to administrative matters. It is the students that suffer in the end. Even when we fall sick, we cannot take leave since our classes would be unattended and we need to have completed the prescribed curriculum by the end of the year. There are never relief teachers available. Sometimes, there are not enough subject teachers and we have to teach subjects in which we are not competent. That can also hamper children's learning since teachers are not subject experts.

Leaders in the schools researched have numerous concerns like those depicted above. In general, they can be classified as concerns related to shortages of teachers and concerns related to heavy workloads.

Concerns about shortage of teachers. In all of the six schools visited there was a shortage of teachers even though the government and the Ministry of Education claim that sufficient teachers are available to fill vacancies throughout the country. In addition, the majority of those studied are relatively new teacher graduates with little or no teaching experience. It was also apparent that only a small number of them are in a remote school placement out of

choice rather than having been required by the central authorities to accept it.

The attraction for those who did opt for a remote school placement is that the schools in question are near to their hometowns. A disincentive for others, it was stated, is that it is often difficult to get transferred from a remote to an urban context once one has been placed there because there tends to be an excess of teachers in the towns and cities. Consequently, it was noted, teachers in remote schools frequently feel discouraged and neglected. Furthermore, they point out that even though a manual of the Royal Civil Service states that public servants, including teachers, placed in remote areas should receive first preference for training opportunities both inside and outside the country, the reality tends to be different.

Concerns about heavy workload. School principals indicate that because of teacher shortages in their schools, they and the teachers have very heavy workloads compared to teachers in urban areas. Both principals and teachers also argue that there are rarely substitute teachers available to them even in times of emergency. Principals further contend that they face difficulties in retaining teachers.

Generally, the reasons given by principals for teachers transferring relate either to spouses being located elsewhere or to poor health. Regarding the latter, because there are no suitable medical treatment facilities in the remote areas, it is difficult for people with poor health to work there. One principal candidly advised as follows: “If your health is not good then you cannot serve in remote places. We need healthy people here.”

Notwithstanding the scenario portrayed so far, a certain optimism can be detected in schools like those examined. One of the major undertakings in these settings, as in other schools throughout the country, involves the leaders in each case engaging locals in the processes associated with producing a school improvement plan. In this connection, one principal stated that at his school “policy is

updated every year through wide consultation locally to make it convenient and practical for use by all stake holders.”

To improve the language of classroom instruction and to enhance teaching and learning, the leaders in most of the schools examined initiated a special language policy. In general, they insist that everyone speaks only English in the classroom. In this connection, one commented:

We do this to improve academic standards since the students are poor in English and good in Dzongkha. I taught teachers in my school how to carry out reading strategies with their students to improve English and to improve their speaking through games. I also taught them how to improve spelling for students above pre-primary level.

Another policy initiated by the leaders at the schools in question was the banning of corporal punishment for students following the issuing of a special directive from the Ministry of Education in 2011.

One of the principals conveyed his experience of banning corporal punishment in his school as follows:

Somehow in 2009/2010 (not sure) when we had the order about the corporal punishment taking place in schools. Biggest turn around. After banning corporal punishment, it took a great turn. Talk was all around on this topic. If we stop, there would be low performance, discipline issues, drugs, vandalism. Every principal was notified to inform their teachers.

He further commented on the effects the new policy is having on his students:

Students now feel able to ask questions of teachers. Before they used to run away, now they come closer to us. During teachers' day, students organize the day on their own unlike in the past. You are socially counted in society. Parents did not like the teachers using corporal punishment. Students drop out due to corporal punishment and miss classes. Now

they enjoy coming to school rather than staying back at home. Nowadays, parents come and ask for admission instead of teachers going around for admission. We are proud of it. There is more attachment from the students.

Several, principals, however, indicated that corporal punishment continues to be exercised in some schools in the country, especially in the remote regions like those in which the schools featured here are located. One can only conclude that either the relatively recent directives from the Ministry of Education have not been made clear or they have not been followed by the school leaders. In recent years too, while counselling services in schools have been introduced throughout much of the country, there are no school counsellors in the schools visited. As a result, it is the 'regular' classroom teachers who bear the burden of operating in their stead as best they can.

Administrative Challenges

My name is Jigme. I came to work in this primary school in 2016. We have eight teachers and 178 students from pre-primary to grade six. Our school is a day school and is helped by the World Food Programme. We serve breakfast and lunch to our students. It is 67 kilometres away from the nearest district. This also means that we have to drive 67 kilometres to do our shopping and to get medical treatment.

I have worked as a school principal for 21 years of my career. Without any training, I was appointed as a principal because I was good at teaching. I had a difficult time at the beginning and wished I had received some kind of leadership training so that I could do my job properly.

As a small primary school, there is not enough money to carry out the school's activities since we collect minimal fees. So, I have to literally beg from visitors and the district office for funds. Parents do contribute labour, vegetables and firewood but that's not enough. Even the water taps have to be replaced every year as they break because of ice.

If you look around, you will see that we do not have conducive classrooms. The windowpanes are broken and the cold wind blows in through the cracks. There is no heater for our students to keep them warm in their classrooms. They have to wear thick clothes to keep themselves warm from the freezing temperature outside. Of course, we teachers do have some heaters in our staffroom but it is of no use when there is no power.

Leaders in the schools visited also have concerns similar to those depicted above. In general, these can be classified as concerns related to lack of leadership development, and concerns related to budgets and inadequate infrastructure

Concerns about lack of leadership development. None of the principals interviewed had received any leadership preparation prior to taking up their positions. Consequently, the majority acquired leadership skills through trial and error as they went about managing the day-to-day operations of their respective schools. In this regard, one of the principals expressed as follows his initial experiences as a principal:

I had a tough time without any training. I didn't have any knowledge about leadership. I had no idea what reports to send and when. I had one or two experienced teachers who helped me. I pushed through that one year. In 2013, I started my Masters in Education (M.Ed) and completed in 2015. If I had completed an M.Ed before becoming a principal, I could have done better and would not have undergone such hardships.

He further stated that “it must be a mandated that leadership training be provided for all school principals. Otherwise there is every chance of one going astray.”

Principals also described how leadership styles in schools in Bhutan have evolved from being authoritative. One of them described his own development according to a trajectory:

At the beginning, I didn't get along with my colleagues since I did not know how to handle them. At present, I don't face any problems as responsibilities are shared among us. Staff are not happy when you act as a boss. Through this leadership, I feel light. I just have to monitor. It has been seven years and shared leadership has been promising and progressive. I do not take any credit. All the credit is due to my staff's hard work.

The focus of school management, principals contend, has shifted from individuals being concerned about general administrative matters to being concerned about academic ones. With administrative assistants in each school, principals say that they are now able to concentrate more on teaching and learning matters than on management matters. This, they added, often gives them and the teachers opportunities to engage in at least a modicum of professional development.

Concerns about budgets and inadequate infrastructure. Primary schools in Bhutan are not as well funded as secondary schools. District officers allocate school budgets based on a set of priorities that are drawn up accordingly. Remote schools, because of their low number of students, receive minimal financial support. Hence, their leaders, with the approval of the district education officer, have to invest a substantial effort in raising revenue by holding school concerts and other activities.

The Ministry of Education authorities do not allow school principals to collect extra money directly from parents and students over and above the minimum school fees mandated by them. Parents, however, often provide some contributions in the form of goods and labour. In this connection, one principal described how parents "contribute vegetables, labour, poles, bark and nails for school fencing. Fencing needs to be carried out every year because of the cattle grazing in the school area. Firewood for the school is also collected by parents".

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The existing infrastructure in all of the schools visited is old and dilapidated. For example, classrooms in cold places have no heating appliances to help keep the children warm. This means that teachers have to light open fires that are often inadequate, as well as unhealthy. Conversely, classrooms in places where it can become warm at certain times of year have no air conditioning. In certain schools, principals took the initiative in seeking external support to address such matters. Some donors responded positively, with one school receiving a promise that wooden panels for insulation and an internal heating system for the classrooms would be provided.

Moreover, classrooms and washrooms are frequently situated far apart from each other. This is problematic for students in cold weather and during the monsoon season. In particular, it makes it difficult to maintain clean classrooms since the children bring mud into the class after visiting the washrooms.

Principals draw attention as well to inadequate teachers' living quarters in their schools and indicate that private housing is in short supply. Compounding the situation, housing is often located some distance from schools. Most houses too are typical village accommodation and are often deemed to be below what is considered appropriate for teachers' normal standard of living.

One principal commented that "everything is a challenge. In a remote school setting, everything comes with a cost. We have challenges in providing expertise, and challenges in obtaining resources both financial and human." At the same time, he pointed to certain benefits: "I have been in the system for 15 years. Friends tease me for working in the 'jungle', but they don't know it's a paradise. In urban areas, there are even more problems." Finally, he summed up his school context by saying: "we have a fresh environment. The four elements of life, water, air, soil and fire are available. What more do I need?"

One principal made a request to the Gross National Happiness secretariat to install 11 panel heaters for the school. The Ecological Society, a non-government organization, has also been contacted

and has agreed to insulate all of the classrooms and provide modern heaters. In addition, funding has been obtained for the replacement of broken windowpanes. Another principal stated that during Parent Teacher Meetings discussions take place on such issues as student health, pastoral care, and academic activities. Organising these endeavours means that the principals have to be resourceful, creative, and effective at networking with the people in the community, while at the same time they have, as they put it, inadequate budgets at their disposal.

Conclusion

The outcomes of the study presented in this paper make it clear that remote schools in Bhutan are characterised by considerable complexity and unpredictability. As a consequence the work of school personnel and, especially principals, in these settings engenders multiple challenges and pressures. It is axiomatic, therefore, that principals need to be prepared as effectively as possible for the rigour of their roles. Consistent with the position established at the outset, it is reiterated that processes of leadership preparation should not draw upon normative models that often have little application to the realities of the school workplace. Moreover, this approach could potentially lead to principals encountering dissonance between how they are prepared and what they experience in their roles.

In contrast, the argument here is that for leadership preparation to be effective it is desirable that it should be grounded in the day-to-day actualities of schools. The efficacy of this approach will, in turn, be dependent on the availability of a comprehensive professional knowledge base embedded in the realities of workplaces found in schools and in the environments in which they are located. It follows, therefore, that in the particular case of Bhutan, the study reported here could be potentially fruitful insofar as it depicts the ‘lived’ experience of practitioners in that setting and describes accurately the realities of their work in such a distinctive context.

It is hoped, then, that those responsible for facilitating leadership learning for school leaders in Bhutan can make use of the portrayal of lived experience presented here to inform the content and pedagogy of principal preparation programmes, as well as processes of leadership development more generally. This is to restate Harber and Dadey's (1993, p.159) observation made many years ago concerning African countries that, nevertheless, continues to 'hit the mark'. In other words, "wherever and however head teacher training takes place, it must be grounded in the reality of the nature of their work and that some form of research will be necessary to establish what the needs stemming from that work are".

At a broader level, it is also hoped that this paper impresses on readers the imperative for researchers, policymakers and educational leaders, including school leaders, to deliberate on matters of context alongside leadership theories when engaging with school improvement for any particular setting. In keeping with a central premise underpinning much of Hallinger's work (2011) about the need for research in the field to embrace different settings, it is further hoped that our work will motivate others to replicate it elsewhere. Notwithstanding recent interest in the relationship between leadership and context there remain many distinctive environments that warrant closer academic attention because of their implications for the situated understanding and exercise of school leadership. After all, as Osborn and his colleagues have elegantly expressed (2002, p. 799), 'one cannot separate leadership from the context any more than one can separate a flavour from food'.

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