



# Impact of Indigenous Practices in School Leadership: A Phenomenological Study of Community Schools

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## Keywords

community school, Indigenous, school leadership practices

## JEL Classification Codes:

I21, J15, Z13

## Online Access



## DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.3126/nccj.v9i1.72252>

## How to Cite APA Style

Sherpa, D., Baraily, K., & Rai, B. (2024). Impact of Indigenous Practices in School Leadership: A Phenomenological Study of Community Schools. *NCC Journal*, 9(1), 80-86

## Abstract

*This paper aims to explore the influences of indigenous practices of the Sherpa community in school leadership. Purposely four Sherpa head teachers with more than five years of experience were selected from the Dolakha district. In-depth interviews were conducted for the information collection and head teachers day to day activities and their decision-making and administrative practices were observed and maintained diary. The interview records and diary notes were transcribed and developed code. Themes were developed using a similar code and analyzed thematically. The study found that Indigenous school leadership enhanced their indigenous knowledge, values, and culture in school. It promotes inclusiveness and equity in the school. The Sherpa community has a strong belief system of rebirth. Taking something from others is a sin, and enjoy donating poor and backwards. Indigenous leaders are found more accountable and transparent in the school administrative process.*

## Introduction

The reserchers got opportunity to involve in school performance audit as a school performance auditor since 2017. The performance auditor needs to study the school's input, process, and output. The researcher have visited 36 schools in Dolakha, Ramechhap and Kaski district in three years. The Education Review Office Ministry of Education and Sports has provided the questionnaires and interview guidelines for the audit. In our school audit of 36 schools, the researcher found a unique school in terms of leadership and management of the school. The school is in a rural area where hardly road tracks are available for transportation. The school is below the large pasture and jungles. On the left side of the large pasture is a village from the Sherpa community. In this school, students come to study from a two-and-a-half-hour distance on a walk, leaving the school near their house. While we were visiting the school, it was covered by snow. The earthquake collapsed most schools and houses in that area, but this school was reconstructed after it collapsed. Recently, they inaugurated the newly reconstructed building and celebrated Saraswati Puja. The school's overall performance based on input, process and output was better than others we visited. After the earthquake, the world heritage Buddha Stupa and other world heritage were collapsed, but Buddha Stupa was reconstructed at first by the collection of public donations from its



management committee from the indigenous community. Tenzing Norgay Sherpa climbed Mount Everest at first, and then the Sherpa people became popular in the field of mountaineering (Spoon, 2013). Majority of mountain guides are still from the Sherpa community and are well popular nationally and internationally.

The Sherpa people are worshipers of Lord Buddha and believe in Buddhist philosophy. Mainly Buddhist philosophies are taught in Gumba (Stupa). Mostly the stupas were built in the contributions and the management community people. Sherpa people believe in a rebirth system and believe that god is everywhere. If somebody does an immoral and unethical job, God will punish them, and there will be less chance for rebirth. In this context, this paper aim to explore the influences of indigenous Sherpa leadership practices in school leadership.

## **Reviewing School Leadership**

The overall performance of the school depends on the school leaders. School leaders need to be accountable and responsible, and they need to commit to the development of the school. Eagly et al. (2003) state the impact of school culture and leadership on new teachers' learning in the workplace. Three different kinds of leadership can be identified in their accounts: normative, effective, and laissez-faire leadership. He explained that normative leadership was depicted as being too rule- and law-dependent, strict, bureaucratic, and inflexible. Most of the time, leaders (head teacher and his team) care about the rules and regulations prescribed by law, so they seem too rigid in their leadership with their staff and stakeholders in an autocratic manner. In this situation, the school staff has a negative attitude towards his profession. Beyond the rules, regulations, and certain structures, people need support, encouragement, and autonomy in their profession to have positive thoughts toward school. In contrast, he states effective leaders are knowledgeable, strong, and goal-oriented, but at the same time, flexible, encouraging, supportive, helpful, and close to staff. In this environment, teachers who adapted to school settings were very much influenced and had a positive attitude towards school leadership.

Regarding effective leadership, Based on empirical work, Wahlstrom and Louis (2008) state that leadership constitutes one of the overarching influences in fostering a sense of professional community amongst teachers who work in collaborative ways to create shared goals, visions, and standards for their schools. She argued that developing a sense of self-efficacy and self-worth amongst teachers is a common trait in school leaders who support and promote building professional communities within schools. In this sense, a supportive and motivational working environment is essential for school development. The leader needs to provide a healthy environment to their subordinate in the workplace.

## **Research Methods**

This study employed phenomenological research design that focuses on the intentional structure of consciousness or experiences (Abdul Razzak, 2015). Phenomenology helps to explicate experiences that may be unfamiliar (Balikci, 2019). The research participants consisted of four head teachers from the Sherpa community selected purposely from Dolakha districts. They have engaged in school leadership (head teacher) more than five years ago. Information was collected through in-depth interviews with the participants and through involvement in the social functions of the Sherpa community. They are from the Sherpa community and are influenced by their cultural value and belief system. Informed consent was obtained from the participant, who were provided details about the research. Open-ended questionnaires, in-depth interviews, and interactions with participants for this study were used for the study. The researcher have engaged in the Sherpa community's cultural activities to study beliefs and value systems. Interviews were recorded on a mobile phone, and descriptive accounts of their experiences were provided, which included all the events, examples, and anecdotes associated with the impact of indigenous leadership. Confidentiality was ensured by keeping the data secret that harms the school, participant, and their community. Recorded interviews were transcribed and coded for basic, organized, and global themes. The global themes were analyzed based on organized and basic themes.

## **Impact of Indigenous Practices on School Leadership**

The Sherpa community has drawn on indignity as a principle and theoretical approach to affect Sherpa's valued

outcomes in educational leadership, research, health, and many other areas (Hohepa, 2013). Indignity offers a way of addressing pressures specified in the mystery about the difference between a duck, which is the challenge of identifying and maintaining a focus on indigenous ways of knowing and doing things, in this case, endorsing indigenous education. This necessarily includes investigating and debating whether there might be universal aspects of educational leadership (Kathleen, 2016). In this study, the reflection of the original feelings of the participants were captured. The major question posed for the participants of this study to reflect upon was: what are the leading practices applied in the Sherpa community? Here follows the presentation of what the participants said and subsequent discussion of each of the expressions they made during the interview. The participants experiences were described thematically as below:

### **Contribution on Educational Aspect**

As the main authority for the managerial and administrative works, the headteacher is the first man in the school administration, who is entirely responsible for the academic growth development as well as achievements. He works as the first contact person with SMC, parents, other visitors, and students, and he addresses all problems and decisions that need to be managed as the first person in the school. The school management committee is an authorized body for planning management and administrative functions; however, it is a fully voluntary service. The SMC chairperson doesn't get any facilities from the school and other agencies, in the context of Nepalese public schools SMC chair gives less priority and contribution to the public school, and most of the important duties are handed over to the headteacher. In this context, we interviewed our participant (P1), and he seemed to be confident and excited to expose his experiences to our queries: What are the impacts of Sherpa weK in school leadership? Regarding the query, P4 stated:

In this school, we have launched the Sherpa language as a subject prescribed by the government of Nepal curriculum development centre. The curriculum development center provides books freely, but it is not easy to bring them to school. We bring Sherpa medium books directly from the curriculum development center in Bhaktapur Nepal. We have a Sherpa language teacher who is funded by donations from Sherpa people and organizations.

This statement stated that the indigenous school leader has enhanced the indigenous identity by teaching the Sherpa language in the school's formal course. The government of Nepal has made provisions in the constitution of Nepal for taking education in the mother tongue (Ministry of Law Justice and Parliamentary Affairs, 2015). In this regard, the school has promoted indigenous peoples' rights to practice their own mother tongue. They have managed to teach the Sherpa language even with public donations and the school's internal funds. We asked who are the donor for the school. In our question, P1 asserted, "The donors mainly belong to the Sherpa community and Sherpa organizations." The books they use in the school are not easily accessible in the local bookstall. The school themselves need to bring from publications and provide them to students. The curriculum development centre has provided the books, but the government does not manage teachers' problems (Khalifa et al., 2019). This fact shows they are committed to promoting their language and culture through formal education. For further information, we asked questions: what would be there if there was a next headteacher in place of you? And why did you apply Sherpa language course book? He stated

We are sure that there wouldn't be the Sherpa language course, in place of it there would be other subjects that may be English. We applied this subject in this school to promote the Sherpa language and culture because this school is located in a dense Sherpa community.

The statement clarifies that the Sherpa head teacher has influence from the Sherpa language, culture, beliefs and values system. His interest in applying the Sherpa language in school aims to promote Sherpa culture and language. Again, He assumed that if there was another head teacher from another caste there wouldn't be Sherpa language as a subject and there may be the English language due to the international use of the English language and motivation of parents and students in the English language. Further participant P4 claims that if the headteacher was a non-indigenous community, He tends to practice other languages guided and motivated by the business motive. On the other hand, cultural value, norms and beliefs are the nations' property and need to be respected,

preserved and promoted (Magni, 2017). Again, we asked questions regarding the ethnic presence of students, teachers, and the school management committee in the school and how other community students and community people perceive learning the Sherpa language from other communities. In this context, P1 asserted, “There are the majority of Sherpa students and parents and some other cast in minority. In the starting time, students and parents from out of the Sherpa community does not prefer this decision but we convinced them”. This statement shows that the use of certain language in school is not easy to apply in school however the feelings of identity, cultural values and respect for culture the Headteachers have faced challenges. Similarly, P4 stated, “we have conducted social and cultural practices of Sherpa in school, such as cultural programs like Serbu (Sherpa dance) competition and Losar musical program.” The statement shows that the headteachers have promoted the Sherpa culture. It is the right of indigenous people to preserve and promote their culture. According to Magni (2017), strong cultural and historical connections make indigenous knowledge an important part of indigenous people’s lives because it gives them the tools they need to stay alive. Furthermore, Magni (2017), said that separating indigenous knowledge from its social and cultural context is worthless and dangerous because it can lead to wrong interpretations and misuse of knowledge. Likewise in the context of the impact of indigenous knowledge in education P2 said “Majority of teacher staffs are from the Sherpa community so they have a bold connection with the community people, thus they have a harmonious relationship”. The statement shows that the local teachers enjoy community people because they are connected in their everyday activities and socially they are connected to each other through support, collaboration and sharing pain and pleasures. On the other hand, indigenous Sherpa people love reciprocity, solidarity and freedom to express and practice their identity and culture (Magni, 2017). The formal education system resulted in the loss and devaluation the indigenous knowledge since the beginning of the 20th century (Mato, 2015). However, indigenous knowledge is directly concerned with nature and human beings and is deeply rooted in people’s culture (Barnhardt & Oscar Kawagley, 2005). Thus, indigenous knowledge impacts people’s day-to-day lives. Concerning the Sherpa language in school, we asked P1 what struggles you faced in applying for the Sherpa language course in school. In our question, he said

The stakeholders of the schools are from mixed communities, but the school is located in the Sherpa community. The headteacher and school management committee are both from the Sherpa community. We have a majority of Sherpa teachers, SMC, and students. Some of the parents raised questions about why we needed to study the Sherpa language. SMC and the teacher staff convinced them.

From the perspective of the power approach, in this school, many stakeholders (School management committee, teacher, and parents) are from the Sherpa community so they are able to implement Sherpa language books even though they faced trouble such as managing books for students, managing teacher from school’s internal sources, critiques and dissatisfaction from other community. From the perspective of identity and respect for culture, it is not a great deal (Devkota et al., 2023). It is human nature, as well as their right to promote and preserve their own culture and values when they are able to implement the decisions. Cultural factors are great issues that every community is easily motivated to preserve and promote because culture is as lovely as its mother. Promoting the cultural values and beliefs of people in the nations is better. It respects the issues of diversity management, but it is better to make choices in subject selection among the parents and students. To provide options to the students and parents, there need to be adequate teachers and classrooms for this purpose, the government’s investment in education needs to increase. But government investment in education is a low priority, so they can’t manage them well. In this situation, some of the students are learning the language, which isn’t interesting to them and would be the reason for the low school enrollment rate. Regarding this enrollment rate in the school, we asked our participant if there is any effect on student enrollment. When our questions, participant P1 stated that our school positively impacts parents and the community in relation to the school’s performance. Students come from two two-hour foot walk leaving the school located in their village. The community senior people community leaders are called for the necessary decisions along with the school management committee, and they inform the community people about student enrollment. A community leader’s voice is more powerful than a school authority’s. Regarding the school curriculum, student enrollment, and regularity, in our quires our participant P2 stated that

Regarding Sherpa language courses in school, only a few parents made questions in the school administration

but they were convinced easily by the school administration. Student enrollment and regularity are good, Political influences are not in school. Student dropout and repetition rate is not found in school with all the contributions of teachers and the school management committee.

This statement presented that the school leadership is accountable and responsible for the development of the school. Political interference has a great impact on public school. In the process of SMC formation, political parties interfere and formed SMC. The SMC interfere with the headteacher and teacher selection is directly influenced by the political parties directly involved. Such interference in politics takes away the appropriate people and unqualified, unfit are in the post. In the case of the headteacher and teacher, the selection was directly influenced by the leader's own candidate (Hamro Manchhe) rather than Ramro Manchhe (a good candidate). However, this school has no political influence, so qualified school leaders and teachers are available in the school. The contribution of the school has made the stakeholder satisfied. They have provided justice to the students in school providing quality education, which is why parents decided to leave the school in their village. Students' no dropout and no repetition rates have motivated teachers and the school management committee.

### **Contribution on the Managerial Aspect**

Successful school leadership is seen in the quality of education to the students and the effectiveness of the school administration. The School Management Committee (SMC) will oversee and operate the school under the provisions of the Education Act. Education Act has made provision for the selection of SMC and Parents Teachers Association (PTA) and their roles and responsibilities ([Ministry of law Justice and Parliamentary Affairs, 2017](#)). The head teacher serves as the SMC secretary, and the parent assembly selects the community school chairman. SMC chairman works voluntarily for the school. The school management committee is given the authority for the managerial aspect of the school (planning, administrative, organizational, decision-making, co-coordinating, staffing, leading) for the effective operation of the school ([Adhikari, 2022](#)). Regarding the SMC selection our participant P3, stated:

The SMC chairperson is selected based on their social contribution and engagement. The parents and community were not interested to be SMC chairperson. So, we proposed that a social and respected person of the to be chairperson, and he accepted our purpose. The chairperson was supportive and inspiring in the transformation of the school. All the agendas were discussed in committee and finalized for the decision.

The statement shows that the social and ethical person of the society were emphasized for the the SMC chairperson. Schools can play a role in the SMC for the selection of appropriate candidates. Supportive and inspiring school environment in the school motivate teachers and staff to contribute to be accountable for their duties that influences the school for their transformation ([Brown et al., 2005](#)). Again, we asked about the decision-making process in the staff meeting. In our concern, Participant P4 stated that "all staff members were equally emphasized for the decision making. All staff can raise their issues as agenda in the meeting, which are discussed and finalized for the decision." The statement asserts that all the teachers and staff were respected in the school and their voices were respected. Employees are responsible for carrying out decisions when they participate. Respecting the teachers in the school and creating a satisfactory working environment promotes to contributes full energy to the improvement of the students learning ([Flores, 2004](#)). Similarly, the P3 stated that, "The SMC and community people would be responsible towards the school if the SMC is honoured by the community people". In the same vain P2 stated that, "The community is always ready to contribute cash, goods and physical work for the school if they need." Similarly, P1 stated, "When they received an informal notice by phone or SMS, parents, the general assembly, and stakeholders or members of the community would be presented". The statement of the P1 and P2 shows positive attitudes and environments would prevail in the community and school, supporting efficient school administration. The local community's relations are making informal plans for the school's growth.

### **Conclusion**

Human beings are products of society they enjoy in society their values; culture and belief systems are always respected and valued for them. Indigenous school leadership has influenced the educational and managerial aspect

in the school and enhanced the indigenous knowledge, values, and culture. Indigenous communities are still deprived and backwards in comparison to the nation's mainstream people. It promotes inclusiveness and equity in society. Sherpa community people have a strong belief system that rebirth, taking something from others, is a sin, and donating something greatly benefits human life. They feel god is everywhere, so transparency and accountability for institutional growth and development are significant. In the indigenous community the social and ethical candidates were selected for SMC chairperson and members. So, they can mobilize their community members for social functions because they are very familiar and well-known. The SMC members are accountable for the transformation of school.

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