



## **Exploring the Opportunities and Challenges of Using Community as Classroom for Learning Geography**

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The present study explored the potential opportunities and challenges of using the Community as Classroom strategy in learning Geography from the perspectives of 264 Bhutanese middle secondary school students. Guided by mixed-method design, survey questionnaires and focus group interviews were used to collect the data. Thematic analysis was employed for qualitative data, whereas quantitative data was analysed using descriptive statistics such as mean and standard deviation. The findings from both the quantitative and qualitative data revealed that there were various opportunities for incorporating the CAC strategy in the Geography curriculum such as learning through the CAC strategy was engaging, experiential, and provided practical knowledge. Moreover, participants believed that it connected them with their communities, enriched their experiences, and enhanced learning outcomes. This approach was seen as authentic and relevant, allowing students to witness the practical application of academic content in their communities. However, both quantitative and qualitative findings revealed that there were certain challenges in using the CAC strategy, including time constraints, large class sizes, transportation costs, diverse student behaviour, and cultural differences. This study concludes with implications and recommendations for future research.

**Keywords:** community as classroom, geography, strategy, opportunities, challenges

### **INTRODUCTION**

Place-Based Education (PBE, hereafter) is increasingly recognized as a significant trend in educational reform and is currently being adopted by educators worldwide. Over time, PBE has evolved and improved, emerging as one of several successful educational approaches in the 21st century (Dorji et al., 2021). It offers educators and policymakers opportunities to explore, understand, and integrate it into their efforts to improve both social and academic excellence (Dorji et al., 2021; Sobel, 2014).

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Sobel (2014) defined PBE as “the process of using the local community and environment as a starting point for teaching various subjects across the curriculum.” According to Teton Science School [TSS] (2016), PBE is characterized as an educational philosophy deeply grounded in environmental education. It is also referred to as place-based learning, environment-based education, and education for sustainability. The foundational principles of PBE, including experiential learning and the emphasis on connecting with local environments, have been present for centuries, as noted by Azano (2011). TSS has been utilizing the PBE approach since its establishment and is acknowledged as a pioneering institution for its implementation of PBE in educational practices (TSS, 2019).

PBE is widely recognized as an effective learning approach that leverages the local community and environment for educational purposes. According to Gruenewald (2008), PBE enhances student engagement and understanding by emphasizing experiential, interdisciplinary, and intergenerational learning, thereby benefiting both skill development and the overall well-being of the community. Moreover, PBE, which integrates learning with communities, has been shown to enhance engagement, academic and social-emotional outcomes, and community influence, as evidenced by studies conducted by Smith (2017) and Thapa et al. (2013). In essence, PBE is viewed as an educational method that employs the local community as a dynamic learning environment.

According to TSS (2019), the structure of PBE revolves around six fundamental principles: Local to Global Context, Learner-Centred, Inquiry-Based, Design Thinking, Community as Classroom, and Interdisciplinary Approach. These principles highlight the significance of hands-on, practical learning encounters, promoting student autonomy in learning, nurturing their capacity to take initiative, forging stronger bonds between schools and communities, fostering a deeper appreciation for the environment, and empowering students to play an active role in improving society.



Figure 1  
Six principles of PBE (TSS, 2019)

The Community as Classroom (CAC, hereafter) is an effective strategy utilized across different subjects to enhance students' learning outcomes. Koinis (2016) defined CAC as an instructional method that links classroom learning to the surrounding community. Additionally, TSS (2016) underscored CAC as a pedagogical approach within modern education, offering students opportunities to interact with their communities. CAC integrates theoretical academic knowledge with real-world application, facilitating experiential and captivating learning experiences while addressing practical community needs (Symeonidis & Schwarz, 2016; TSS, 2016). Moreover, it fosters a sense of commitment to learning and encourages students to actively contribute to their communities (Ark et al., 2020).

CAC has emerged as a valuable pedagogical approach within Bhutanese Geography education, as noted by the Ministry of Education (MoE, 2017). This strategy aligns with the imperative to modernize Geography education to reflect contemporary trends and offer meaningful, engaging, authentic, and experiential learning experiences, as emphasized by the Department of Curriculum and Professional Development (DCPD, 2017). CAC strengthens the relationship between schools and communities, encourages hands-on learning, and establishes connections between education and the values of Gross National Happiness (GNH) within the community, as highlighted by Powdyl (2014). Integration of CAC into Geography education facilitates personalized and significant learning encounters, encourages problem-solving and community-oriented solutions, and promotes impactful social change through active civic engagement, in accordance with Sobel (2004). Further, Rigdel and Thapa (2023) supports that the Bhutan Baccalaureate initiative regards community inclusion as pivotal for fostering a knowledgeable and sustainable society.

Geography education plays a vital role in fostering global awareness and environmental consciousness among students, equipping them with the knowledge and skills needed to address pressing global challenges (Rigdel et al., 2023). However, traditional classroom settings often fall short of providing students with practical, real-world experiences that deepen their understanding of Geography. A study by Koinis (2016) stated that Geography textbooks offer opportunities for CAC integration, yet teacher-centred instruction prevails, limiting meaningful engagement with local resources and community. Similarly, Utha et al. (2016) corroborated that conventional teaching methods, examination-oriented assessments, and a uniform curriculum impede the integration of student-centred and practical learning methodologies.

To bridge the gap, educators have begun to explore the use of the CAC for learning Geography. Griffin (2019) notes that the CAC approach has become well-established within the Bhutanese curriculum, introduced through a partnership with TSS. Moreover, the Educational Professional Development (PD) program has taken the initiative in implementing PBE, providing training to a considerable number of curriculum officers, master trainers, teachers, principals, and vice principals (DCPD, 2018). While this approach offers numerous opportunities for enriching Geography education, it also presents several challenges that need exploration. For instance, Koinis (2016) found that participants in PD workshops have cited factors such as curriculum structure, resource

availability, time constraints, and lack of administrative support as barriers to implementing CAC.

Although CAC is integrated into the secondary school Geography curriculum (Rigdel & Thapa, 2023), its opportunities and challenges are not studied. Therefore, this study aims to explore the potential opportunities and existing challenges of using the CAC as an instructional strategy in learning Geography. The objectives of the current study are to fill this research gap by providing additional insight into students' perceived opportunities and challenges of using CAC as an instructional strategy in learning Geography. This study is significant as it provides insights into how CAC as an instructional strategy is perceived in a Bhutanese middle secondary school education context that is under-represented in the international literature.

### **Research questions**

1. What are the opportunities for using the CAC as an instructional strategy in learning Geography in middle secondary school?
2. What are the challenges of using the CAC as an instructional strategy in learning of Geography in middle secondary school?

### **Literature Review**

#### **Concept of the community as classroom**

The CAC approach represents a modern educational strategy rooted in the principles of PBE. Its primary goal is to improve learning outcomes by incorporating local communities and real-life experiences into the teaching and learning process (TSS, 2019). According to TSS (2016), CAC shares similarities with other concepts such as Community-Based Learning (CBL), Place-Based Learning (PBL), and Community-Based Education (CBE). At its core, CAC revolves around connecting academic learning with the cultural, historical, and natural resources found within the local community. Similarly, Koinis (2016) described CAC as an educational philosophy and instructional approach that educators adopt to link classroom lessons with the cultural and natural aspects of their local community. In essence, CAC serves as a teaching and learning strategy employed by educators to bridge the gap between academic knowledge and real-world application by engaging students directly, providing them with a deeper understanding of both their lessons and their community.

#### **Practices of community as classroom in the school curriculum**

The concept of CAC has historical roots and has been adopted as an instructional strategy by educators worldwide for many years. The idea of linking education to the local environment can be traced back to ancient civilizations like the Greeks and Romans (Elfer, 2014). Furthermore, Smith (2017) found that CAC has been widely embraced by educational institutions globally and has garnered significant attention since the early 2000s. In the United States, TSS has been at the forefront of PBE since its establishment in 1967. Moreover, there is a lack of documented evidence, although teachers and students have been applying the CAC approach in Bhutan (Koinis, 2016).

TSS places a strong emphasis on integrating PBE into its programs and collaborates with organizations like GETTING SMART to promote and serve as a model for PBE on both a national and global level (TSS, 2016). Similarly, in Finland, PBL shares a pedagogical approach similar to CAC, highlighting interdisciplinary learning (Symeonidis & Schwarz, 2016). PBL tackles real-world challenges like climate change by integrating ideas from different academic disciplines. This approach resonates with the ideals of PBE, engaging learners in authentic local-to-global phenomena and prompting them to employ diverse viewpoints in their learning, as outlined by (Symeonidis & Schwarz, 2016).

### **Opportunities of using community as classroom strategy**

The CAC strategy is a learner-centred, interdisciplinary teaching approach used by educators to enrich education either by integrating the local community into the classroom or by relocating the classroom to the community. According to Sobel (2004, 2014), the incorporation of the CAC strategy leads to notable opportunities, including increased student engagement, skill development, experiential learning, and overall improvement in learning outcomes. Similarly, Smith (2017) and Thapa et al. (2013) substantiated that CAC fosters better learning outcomes, enhance engagement and improve community impact. Moreover, Dorji et al. (2021) found that PBE has greater impact on students' learning outcomes as compared to conventional methods of teaching. CAC promotes a profound comprehension of the subject matter by applying real-life experiences, motivating students to investigate, recognize community requirements, and contribute to positive social change. Powers (2004) argues that when education is firmly rooted in the local community, students are better able to recognize the practical significance of their learning experiences. Consequently, this connection enhances their active participation and involvement in the educational process.

Moreover, the incorporation of the CAC pedagogical approach into Geography education fosters experiential and engaging learning settings (Smith, 2017). This approach encourages students to delve into geographical concepts through geo-inquiry questions, actively engaging with and acquiring skills in areas such as remote sensing, Geographic Information Systems, and geospatial analysis (Williams, 2017). Moreover, CAC as an instructional strategy enhances critical and creative thinking skills which promotes academic learning experiences. Yaşar et al. (2023) asserted that providing rich learning practices related to teaching thinking skills to students creates positive learning outcomes.

The intentional inclusion of CAC in the curriculum allows students to put subject-specific skills and knowledge into practice while tackling community issues. This approach nurtures responsible citizenship by motivating students to recognize and resolve community problems, promoting a sense of purpose and active involvement (Melaville et al., 2019). Through carefully planning and executing CAC, educators create a pedagogy centred on active participation, where students genuinely invest their efforts and attention, leading to meaningful learning experiences (Hutson, 2011). Additionally, a study by Pambudi (2022) determined that utilizing outdoor learning

techniques positively influences both the motivation and academic achievement of elementary students in geometry.

Furthermore, CAC helps as a means to close the divide between knowledge, skills, and community involvement, establishing a harmonious connection between what students need to learn and what they can contribute (Griffin, 2019; Koinis, 2016; TSS, 2019). In essence, the CAC strategy empowers students to play an active role in their communities, all the while equipping them with crucial skills and knowledge, leading to enhanced learning experiences and meaningful civic engagement.

### **Challenges of using community as classroom strategy**

Despite the numerous benefits and opportunities that the use of the CAC strategy offers to students, community partners, and educators, there are several challenges encountered when integrating it into the teaching and learning processes. As noted by Morton (2009), the primary challenges include time constraints, a deficiency in feedback, reflection, and evaluation. Additionally, Morton (2009) highlighted that implementing the CAC strategy can be more time and energy-intensive compared to traditional teaching methods. This is because students often require additional time to complete tasks within this approach. Furthermore, a lack of knowledge among both teachers and students regarding the local community and its resources can hinder learning and limit the development of skills and the creation of knowledge and experiences (Smith, 2017; Brinkmann, 2019).

Additionally, Howley et al. (2011) pointed out that cultural differences can sometimes pose limitations because individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds may unintentionally violate the norms, expectations, beliefs, and values of other cultures, potentially causing a breakdown in the school-community relationship. The successful implementation of the CAC strategy requires the involvement of multiple stakeholders, and a lack of support from school administration and community partners can cast doubt on its feasibility (Morton, 2009). Furthermore, utilizing this strategy carries inherent risks, and prioritizing the safety of learners is crucial. Similarly, large class sizes and inadequate transportation facilities can restrict the use of the CAC strategy in Geography Education (DCPD, 2019).

### **CAC in Bhutanese curriculum**

Griffin (2019) substantiated that the integration of the PBE approach into the Bhutanese curriculum has gained recognition, thanks to collaborative efforts with TSS facilitated by the Jim Peterson Bhutan Education Trust Fund. Numerous joint initiatives with TSS have been implemented over time to advance PBE within Bhutan. The Educational PD program took the lead in implementing CAC, training a significant number of curriculum officers, master trainers, teachers, principals, and vice principals (DCPD, 2018). Significantly, orientation sessions on the PBE approach were provided to four focal schools.

In response to the changing global education scenario, Samtse College of Education [SCE] initiated a partnership with TSS in 2009. This collaboration resulted in the incorporation of PBE into several academic programs, such as M.Ed, Postgraduate, and

B.Ed. Additionally, the Centre for Innovation in Science Education and Research was established to record educational experiences utilizing PBE, as highlighted by Kinley and Griffin (2017).

PBE was piloted in the Environmental Studies (EVS) integrated English and Dzongkha curriculum. According to a report by DCPD in 2019, a survey conducted in 2018 indicated the considerable alignment of PBE with the Bhutanese curriculum and educational goals. Consequently, PBE has been formally integrated into the primary curriculum, with intentions to gradually extend its incorporation into later educational stages (DCPD, 2019).

Moreover, the Bhutan Youth Development Fund (YDF) partnered with TSS to launch a PBE initiative at My Gakidh Village School in Talhogang, Punakha, in 2017. This program embraces the notion of the village as a school, expanding educational opportunities beyond the traditional school boundaries and integrating learning across different levels within the village community (Dorji et al., 2021).

### **Theoretical underpinning**

This study is grounded in a theoretical framework of social constructivism by Vygotsky (1978) and constructivist theory of perception by Gregory (1970). These theories offer a systematic and coherent basis for exploring the implementation of the CAC strategy within the realm of Geography education.

Social constructivism underscores the notion that learners play an active role in constructing knowledge by integrating new information with their pre-existing understanding (Thomas et al., 2014). It promotes collaborative learning through activities like debates, group inquiry, and problem-solving, fostering creativity and critical thinking (Schreiber & Valle, 2013). Besides, Vygotsky (1978) highlighted the role of cultural and social interactions in learning, emphasizing the co-construction of knowledge through shared experiences. This theory is congruent with CAC because it entails active participation within the community, which facilitates learners in cultivating deeper understandings and forging personal bonds.

Similarly, the constructivist theory of perception underpins this study by suggesting that understanding is constructed based on past experiences and existing knowledge. Perception is viewed as a constructive process shaped by individual thoughts and imagination, enabling learners to comprehend the world around them (Gregory, 1970). Moreover, the CAC strategy aligns with this theory by prompting learners to build their comprehension through interactions with the local environment and experts, resulting in meaningful and authentic perspectives.

CAC strategy, as supported by social constructivism and the constructivist theory of perception, promotes active participation in real-world settings. It fosters interactive and hands-on learning experiences, developing problem-solving skills, creative thinking, and effective solutions (Dorji et al., 2021; Koinis, 2016; Sobel, 2014). However, the quality of interactions with the community influences the cognitive and social benefits

gained by learners, emphasizing the importance of meaningful engagement (Nguyen et al., 2016).

## **METHOD**

### **Research context**

The present study was carried out in Bhutan, the scholarly least explored country in South-central Asia (Wangdi et al., 2023). In the context of Bhutan, examining the application of the CAC strategy for Geography learning is relevant yet presents challenges. Bhutan's commitment to GNH, the guiding developmental philosophy of Bhutan which aligns with CAC principles, utilizing the nation's rich cultural and ecological diversity for experiential learning. However, logistical challenges such as remote terrains and limited accessibility, coupled with the imperative to integrate local perspectives, pose significant challenges.

Nevertheless, even to date, CAC is introduced in Bhutanese classrooms, owing to inevitable challenges (DCPD, 2018, 2019; Dorji et al., 2021; Griffin, 2019; Kinley & Griffin, 2017). Dorji et al. (2021) identified the opportunities and challenges encountered by teachers when integrating PBE alongside CAC, a fundamental principle of PBE. Consequently, for effective utilization of CAC as an instructional approach in MSS, it is imperative for the Bhutanese government, policymakers, and educational institutions to grasp the potential benefits and obstacles associated with employing CAC in Geography education.

### **Research design and participants**

Pragmatism was chosen as the most suitable paradigm for this study because it allows for flexibility in working with both quantitative and qualitative data. It offers researchers the opportunity to examine how these two types of data can connect effectively. In accordance with pragmatic principles, this study utilized a mixed-method approach, integrating both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies. This approach is commonly used by researchers in the field of social science research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Particularly, this study employed a convergent parallel mixed-method design to investigate students' perspectives on the opportunities and challenges associated with implementing the CAC instructional strategy in Geography education at the MSS level.

Moreover, the study utilized a blend of Cochran's sampling method (1977) and purposive sampling to ensure the selection of a suitable and pertinent subgroup from the target population for inclusion in the survey questionnaires and focus group interviews. Subsequently, Cochran's formula for calculating sample size was utilized for the survey questionnaire. Purposive sampling involves selecting specific individuals or groups based on a researcher's judgment and specific purpose (Creswell, 2014). A total of 264 students from classes IX and X of Tsirang District, ages range from 13 to 16 years participated in the study. There were 102 females and 162 male respondents who study in public school. Qualitative data were gathered through four focus group interviews, with each group comprising six participants selected from four MSS employing



purposive sampling to ensure gender balance among the participants. These sampling methods were employed to gather pertinent information, minimize bias, and achieve a well-rounded representation of the study while adhering to ethical principles (Cohen et al., 2007). Both survey respondents and interview participants were informed of the voluntary nature of their participation and the option not to respond if uncomfortable.

### **Research instruments**

The current study employed two research instruments to collect data. The primary research instrument utilized was a survey questionnaire. It consisted of four demographic questions (such as gender, age, and knowledge on CAC). Survey questionnaires were developed using Google form and were administered online. The survey questionnaires were adapted from TSS (2019) and comprised 20 items categorized into two themes, namely “opportunities” and “challenges,” utilizing a 6-point Likert Scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (6). To assess the quantitative instrument’s reliability and validity, experts oversaw the process, and a pilot test was conducted with 150 students from a high school in Samtse Dzongkhag. By employing SPSS-25, a Cronbach’s Alpha score of .79 was achieved, indicating the reliability and validity of the survey instruments.

To enhance the validity and reliability of the findings, the study utilized one face-to-face focus group interview with six participants from each school to gather qualitative data. Thus, eight semi-structured interview questions were employed, specifically designed to elicit accurate information from participants regarding their perceptions of the CAC strategy and its opportunities and challenges in learning Geography at the MSS level. The interview questions were reviewed by two qualitative research experts and pilot-tested. The possible changes were made, particularly for the interview questions based on feedback from experts and pilot analysis. Additionally, the qualitative data findings were verified using a step-by-step approach in conducting thematic analysis of Nowell et al. (2017) which also refers to the four trustworthiness criteria.

### **Data analysis**

The researchers together cleaned both the quantitative and qualitative data before starting the analysis. This process was carried out to ensure that the dataset was complete, accurate, and ready for analysis. The survey questionnaires were analysed using the SPSS-25. The quantitative data was analysed using descriptive statistics based on the scores of the mean and standard deviation for all the themes. The participants’ ratings frequency is classified into six levels according to the criteria outlined by Best and Kahn (2002), as depicted in Table 1.

The present study utilized Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis criteria to examine the data. This process involved becoming acquainted with the data, initial coding, recognizing themes, reviewing them, defining and labeling them, and ultimately generating the final report. The information obtained from focus group interviews was transcribed, coded, and organized into various themes aligned with the research questions. Subsequently, the findings were presented to the participants for validation

through member checking. Creswell and Miller (2000) stated that member checking enhances the credibility of the research process which is a crucial component of building trustworthiness in a study involving qualitative data.

Table 1  
Frequency of 6-point Likert scale

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

## FINDINGS

The findings of the current study are presented in two sections: Opportunities of using community as classroom and challenges of using community as classroom.

### Opportunities of using community as classroom

Table 2 shows a descriptive analysis of students' *views on opportunities of using the CAC strategy* with the overall mean scores ( $M = 4.86$ ,  $SD = .97$ ). This suggests that the majority of respondents strongly agree that there are various opportunities for using the CAC strategy in learning Geography. Similarly, the qualitative findings also indicate that there are many opportunities for using the CAC strategy in learning Geography.

Most of the interview participants expressed that utilizing the CAC strategy for learning is beneficial for them. For example, FGSTD2 articulated, "Students become so excited and motivated to learn outside than closed classroom as learning outside will be engaging and experiential. We learn practically and never feel bored and sleepy" indicating learning outside using different settings can influence learning as new learning places can build learners' curiosity in learning. In addition, FGSTD3 stated, "Learning outside will give us extra knowledge and gain values of community lives". Further, FGSTD4 added, "The use of the CAC strategy connects us with our community through active engagement and learners know and find the solutions of the problems that concern the society and thereby it enriches experiences and enhances learning outcomes". FGSTD6 opined, "I love learning by doing. Since my school is a piloting school for Bhutan Baccalaureate, we bring seven gifts from our community and share during our learning showcase." The majority of interview participants viewed community-based education as authentic to acquire realistic learning where students directly witness the relevance of academic content in the communities.

Table 2  
Views on opportunities of using the CAC strategy

Item	Mean	SD
1. The local environment is favorable for the use of the community as classroom in learning Geography.	4.90	.90
2. The Geography curriculum of the MSS encourages learning Geography lessons using the community as classroom approach.	4.44	1.11
3. The local community has rich educational resources for learning Geography.	4.55	1.08
4. I feel engaged when the teacher uses the community as classroom approach to learning Geography.	4.84	1.00
5. I learn more when the teacher uses community as classroom strategy for learning Geography.	5.06	.91
6. I gain more knowledge by interacting with local people.	5.02	.93
7. My experiences and skills improve when I learn in the fields.	4.97	.94
8. Learning by connecting with the local environment helps in deeper learning.	4.95	.89
9. I feel more connected with the local community when I am involved in learning in the community.	4.82	.93
10. I can understand the problems of the community by being involved in learning in the community.	4.92	.93
11. I can contribute more if I am connected and involved in learning geography in my community.	4.83	1.06
12. I can value and learn more about my community if Geography lessons are taught in the community.	5.06	.90
Total mean	4.86	.97

### Challenges of using community as classroom

Table 3 shows the average mean score ( $M = 4.11$ ,  $SD = .1.43$ ), which indicated that respondents agreed that there are some challenges while using CAC as a strategy in learning Geography. Similarly, the qualitative findings also indicated that there are some challenges to using the CAC strategy in learning Geography. For instance, FGSTD2 expressed:

The major challenge is time. We have a vast syllabus and just having 50 minutes in a period is challenging for teachers to complete the entire syllabus on time. Many times, there is a restriction for teachers because of risk and getting permission from the principal. Even transportation costs are another major challenge.

In addition, large classroom sizes and different behaviour of students challenges the teachers to monitor, and diverse cultural backgrounds may hinder connection with the community for learning (FGSTD3 & FGSTD4).

Table 3  
Perceptions of challenges of using the CAC strategy

Item	Mean	SD
13. The school encourages my teacher to use the Community as Classroom approach for learning Geography.	3.11	1.31
14. Community as Classroom approach demands more time.	4.69	2.70
15. The use of a Community-Based Learning approach will be hampered by large class sizes.	4.27	1.05
16. Community as Classroom involves risk.	3.78	1.43
17. Community as Classroom incurs more cost.	3.69	1.36
18. Transportation facilities limit us from learning in the community.	4.29	1.27
19. Learning depends upon the availability of resources in the community.	4.79	1.08
20. There is an issue in covering the syllabus when the teacher uses the Community as Classroom approach to learn Geography.	4.29	1.22
Total mean	4.11	1.43

## DISCUSSION

The present study explored the opportunities and challenges associated with utilizing community as classroom for learning Geography from the perspectives of Bhutanese MSS students. The opportunities and challenges are discussed below in light of social constructivism and constructivist theory and previous empirical studies.

### Opportunities of using community as classroom

The overall findings of this study suggest that there are various opportunities for using the CAC strategy in learning Geography. Similarly, the qualitative findings also indicated that there are many opportunities for using the CAC strategy in learning Geography.

While accessing the students' perceptions of opportunities in using the CAC strategy, the findings reveal that the incorporation of the CAC strategy in learning has both social and academic benefits. Academically, the CAC strategy as argued by Ark et al. (2020) and Koinis (2016) asserted that CAC uses local communities as rich learning ecosystems, offering educational resources and real-world experiences. Qualitative data indicates that Bhutan Baccalaureate schools incorporate the community as a classroom approach for Geography education. Additionally, PBE has positive impact on students' learning outcomes, increased engagement and community impact (Dorji et al., 2021; Smith, 2017; Thapa et al., 2013) Correspondingly, Pambudi (2022) demonstrates that the outdoor learning approach positively impacts the academic performance of elementary students in mathematics.

Likewise, both survey respondents and FG participants agree that Community-based education fosters real-world learning, showing academic content's practical relevance. The majority of the interview participants have a belief that learning outside can give them extra knowledge and gain value and appreciation of communities' lives. Moreover, Powers (2004) contends that an education rooted in the local community

enables students to perceive the practical significance of their learning, thereby fostering increased engagement in the educational process. Additionally, Meaningful learning occurs when students are actively involved in addressing issues pertaining to both human and environmental systems, impacting students and fellow community members directly (Dorji et al., 2021). Further, Smith (2002) advocated that CAC connects students to their local community, integrating subjects across the curriculum and cultivating a sense of care for the world through a deeper understanding of their immediate environment.

Moreover, the findings of this study align with those of Miller and Twum (2017), who asserted that principles of PBE, such as CAC, have facilitated effective teaching and hands-on learning experiences, particularly when learners assumed responsibility for their own learning. For instance, the current study suggests that the CAC strategy connects local communities, fostering direct experiential learning and holistic understanding in learning Geography. Socially, the community-based learning approach as stated by Melaville et al. (2019), often leverages local assets and encourages to become a dedicated community partner. Community-based schools integrate many elements of learner-centred, experiential and deeper learning to influence the local communities as a learning ecosystem for learners (Fischer et al., 2007; Resor, 2010). Similarly, our findings reveal that the infusion of this approach can help students develop an understanding of communities and their role in improving and impacting local places.

Additionally, this study also found that students develop essential skills, knowledge, and self-directed learning including mastery of core academic content. Similarly, the study by Williams (2017) revealed that the learners can engage in a project that can yield solutions for societies beyond the classrooms and have an appreciation of the world around them. The finding is consistent with the report by TSS (2016), where it was found that the incorporation of six principles of PBE especially CAC can engender students a sense of relationship with their local communities, develop problem-solving skills, and the ability to collaborate with others by cultivating a sense of responsibility for the betterment of the communities. Moreover, Ark et al. (2020) pointed out that community-based education is a necessity for motivation that creates opportunities to promote autonomy, and mastery and have a purpose for learning that can be applied in real-life situations. Similarly, Pambudi (2022) provided evidence supporting the notion that the outdoor learning approach positively influences elementary students' motivation to learn geometry. Overall, the CAC strategy nurtures meaningful learning connections and empowers students to apply their learning in practical situations.

#### **Challenges of using community as classroom**

However, our findings reveal that there exist some challenges in using CAC as a strategy in learning Geography. While accessing the students' perceptions on the challenges of using the CAC approach for learning, it is found that many of them have a concern that the CAC learning approach will consume more time, and incorporating it may challenge teachers to cover the syllabus on the stipulated time.

Specifically, this study reveals that the time constraint is the major challenge among others. The previous studies also highlighted that implementing the CAC strategy can be more time and energy-intensive compared to traditional teaching methods (Dorji et al., 2021; Kinley and Griffin, 2017; Koinis, 2016; Powers, 2004). This is because students often require additional time to complete tasks within this approach (Kinley and Griffin, 2017; Morton (2009). Additionally, the report of TSS (2019) substantiated that the PBE approaches are not used frequently in teaching in Bhutanese classrooms because lack of time, lack of knowledge, and skills of the approach might have challenged the educators to use CAC strategy in learning Geography in middle secondary schools.

Moreover, our findings reveal that students lack CAC knowledge in learning Geography. A study conducted by Smith (2017) and Brinkmann (2019) substantiated that a lack of knowledge among both teachers and students regarding the local community and its resources can hinder learning and limit the development of skills and the creation of knowledge and experiences. This aligns with the findings of Miller and Twum (2017) and Powers (2004) who mentioned that there was a crucial need for skills and knowledge to effectively implement CAC.

Additionally, both quantitative and qualitative findings indicated that adequate resources are another challenge in using the CAC approach for learning Geography. The findings are in line with a study in SCE by Kinley and Griffin (2017) who reported that inadequate resources are the major concerns while implementing PBE approaches like CAC at the tertiary level of education. Similarly, inadequate transportation facilities can restrict the use of the CAC strategy in Geography Education (DCPD, 2019). Moreover, adverse weather conditions pose a challenge to outdoor activities in a CAC class (Miller & Twum, 2017; Koinis, 2016).

Furthermore, our research findings highlight potential challenges such as cultural differences and insufficient support from school administration, which hinder the effective utilization of CAC in Geography education. The finding is consistent with Howley et al. (2011) who pointed out that cultural differences can sometimes pose limitations because individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds may unintentionally violate the norms, expectations, beliefs, and values of other cultures, potentially causing a breakdown in the school-community relationship. Moreover, the successful implementation of the CAC strategy requires the involvement of multiple stakeholders, and a lack of support from school administration and community partners can cast doubt on its feasibility (Morton, 2009; TSS, 2019). Furthermore, utilizing this strategy carries inherent risks, and prioritizing the safety of learners is crucial (DCPD, 2019).

## **CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

The findings indicated that there are numerous opportunities for using the CAC strategy in learning Geography. The current study underscored both the academic and social opportunities of employing the CAC strategy. Academically, it leveraged local communities as rich learning ecosystems, offering educational resources and real-world experiences. Socially, it encouraged students to become dedicated community partners, fostering experiential and deeper learning. However, the study also revealed challenges

in implementing the CAC strategy, which includes demanding curriculum, time constraints, and practical problems like bad weather and transportation. The findings also suggest that time constraint was a significant challenge faced during the application of CAC strategy. Additionally, significant challenges were also caused by a lack of resources and expertise on the part of both teachers and students. Other Potential challenges were limited support from school administration and cultural differences.

Overall, integrating the CAC strategy into Geography education holds promise for empowering students, enriching their learning experiences, and nurturing meaningful connections with their communities. While challenges exist, the opportunities in terms of academic and social growth make it a valuable approach worth considering for educators in Bhutan and beyond. Future efforts should focus on addressing these challenges while further promoting the opportunities of the CAC strategy in Geography education.

#### **LIMITATION AND RECOMMENDATION**

Some of the main limitations of the study are limited knowledge of students in the CAC strategy and PBE. The lack of awareness of the PBL approach became a shortcoming in acquiring authentic information from participants. Additionally, the area of the study was restricted to four secondary schools. Therefore, it is beyond the framework of this to generalize students' perception of the opportunities and challenges of using the CAC strategy in other schools across the country. Further, this study is based on the perceptions of students and the absence of teachers' perceptions in the study will not give authentic information on the use of the CAC strategy in learning Geography in MSS and its emphasized benefits. Furthermore, the lack of Bhutanese literature has impeded the smooth journey of the study.

Initially, to augment the study's influence and applicability, future research could involve participants comprising both teachers and students from schools across the nation. Secondly, to conduct a comprehensive examination, it is recommended to utilize an exploratory sequential research design, ensuring precise data collection and delivering actionable insights to readers. Thirdly, considering the study's findings on the benefits of the CAC approach, concerned authorities and stakeholders should organize PD programs for teachers. This will facilitate the effective implementation of PBE by teachers, leading to improved social and academic outcomes. Finally, prioritizing the engagement of the local community as collaborative learning partners is essential, allowing students to acquire genuine real-world learning opportunities.

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