School History Museums as Learning Tools for Enhancing Historical Knowledge in Bhutanese Secondary Schools A QUAN-Dominant Mixed-Methods Study

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ABSTRACT

School history museums can connect classroom history with artefacts, oral memory, local heritage, and students' lived cultural experiences. This study examined students' experiences of museum-based learning in four secondary schools in one eastern Dzongkhag of Bhutan, focusing on engagement, Bhutanese cultural and historical learning, implementation support, practical difficulties, and museum-learning test performance. A pragmatic, quantitatively driven convergent mixed-methods multiple-case design was used. Quantitative evidence came from 252 Class X students who completed a 30-item questionnaire and a researcher-developed museum-learning test. Qualitative evidence came from five student focus-group discussions involving 25 students and four semi-structured history-teacher interviews. Analyses included descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, exploratory factor analysis, Kruskal–Wallis tests with Dunn–Holm comparisons, Spearman correlations, and qualitative thematic analysis. Students generally reported positive experiences, especially in cultural and historical learning. Significant differences across schools appeared in engagement, cultural learning, implementation support, and test performance, while technical/logistical difficulty did not differ significantly. School 2 reported the highest scores for cultural learning, implementation support, and museum-learning test performance; School 1 had the lowest test performance. Self-reported learning experiences were not significantly associated with test scores, suggesting that positive perceptions and measurable performance should not be treated as equivalent. Students and teachers described artefacts as making history tangible, while uneven access to artefacts, display space, teacher guidance, and student confidence shaped implementation. The study concludes that school history museums can be valuable learning tools when they are linked to historical enquiry, adequately supported, and connected to local and national heritage.

Keywords: School History Museums; Museum-Based Learning; History Education; Historical Knowledge; Cultural Learning; Bhutan; Mixed Methods

INTRODUCTION

History education is expected to move beyond memorising dates and events towards enquiry, interpretation, evidence use, and reasoned explanations of the past. Museums can support this shift by bringing learners into contact with artefacts, photographs, maps, oral memory, and curated narratives. The International Council of Museums (2022) describes museums as institutions that research, conserve, interpret, and exhibit tangible and intangible heritage while providing educational experiences. In history education, therefore, a museum is not merely a room containing old objects; it is a learning environment in which students can ask questions about evidence, context, continuity, and change.

Research suggests that museum learning is most productive when students have clear learning purposes and are guided to interpret exhibits rather than accept displays as neutral accounts (Geerts et al., 2024; Marcus et al., 2017). Museum experiences can support critical observation and interpretation, but exposure to objects alone does not guarantee deep historical understanding (Kisida et al., 2016; Marovah & Ncube, 2024). Students need opportunities to examine where an object came from, how it was used, what it reveals about the past, and how interpretations may differ.

In Bhutan, school history museums are especially relevant because history learning intersects with cultural identity, local heritage, indigenous knowledge, and national consciousness. The National History Curriculum Framework for Classes VII–XII supports historical enquiry and cultural understanding (Royal Education Council, 2019). Bhutanese scholarship has also highlighted the potential of school and local museums to connect students with traditional tools, textiles, photographs, oral traditions, and community memory (Dendup, 2020; Dorji, 2018; Gyeltshen & Wangchuk, 2018; Tshewang & Maxwell, 2022; Wangmo & Dema, 2019). Such connections can help students understand history as part of their communities and everyday lives.

However, school museums operate under different conditions. Access to authentic artefacts, suitable display space, teacher preparation, time, community participation, and students' confidence may vary from school to school. Bhutanese studies have identified barriers including limited resources, uneven teacher preparation, language accessibility, and inconsistent community participation (Dema & Gyeltshen, 2020; Dorji & Wangmo, 2021; Dorji & Zangmo, 2023; Lhamo, 2022; Penjor, 2020; Zangmo, 2021). It is therefore important to examine not only whether students value museum learning, but also how their experiences and test performance vary across school contexts.

This study examines school history museum activities among Class X students in four secondary schools in one eastern Dzongkhag, Bhutan. It contributes evidence about students' engagement, cultural and historical learning, implementation support, practical difficulties, and museum-learning test performance. It also uses students' and teachers' accounts to explain differences between schools. The study does not treat a positive museum experience as automatic proof of improved historical knowledge; instead, it examines the reported experience and test results as related but distinct forms of evidence.

Research Questions

RQ1. How do students' reported engagement, Bhutanese cultural and historical learning, implementation support, technical/logistical difficulties, and museum-learning test performance vary across the four participating schools?

RQ2. What associations exist among students' reported museum-learning experiences and their museum-learning test performance?

RQ3. How do student and teacher accounts explain similarities and differences in the implementation and learning experiences of school history museums?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Museum-based learning and historical enquiry

Museum-based learning can make historical content concrete through close observation of objects, images, and material evidence. Kisida et al. (2016) found that structured museum experiences can support students' critical examination of visual evidence. Mujtaba et al. (2018) similarly emphasise the potential of museum learning to support cognitive, affective, and social outcomes when learning goals and teacher guidance are clear. In history education, students should be encouraged to ask questions, compare evidence, consider context, and justify interpretations rather than simply reproduce information from display labels.

Geerts et al. (2024) identify instruction as a central issue in history-museum learning. Their review highlights the importance of teaching methods, learning objectives, and the relationship between schools and museum environments. Marovah and Ncube (2024) likewise argue that museums can support historical thinking when students engage with evidence, perspective, interpretation, and context. For school-created museums, this means that artefacts need to be accompanied by questions and explanations that make their historical significance visible.

Engagement and historical thinking

Engagement can be behavioural, emotional, cognitive, and agentic (Reeve, 2025). In a school museum, students may participate by collecting and arranging objects, feel curiosity or cultural pride, interpret an artefact's meaning, and contribute ideas to the display. Engagement becomes educationally meaningful when it supports disciplinary learning. Historical thinking includes asking historical questions, interpreting evidence, and constructing reasoned accounts of the past (Lévesque & Clark, 2018). Wilke et al. (2023) further indicate that historical thinking requires deliberate instructional design, not simple exposure to sources. Museum activities should therefore connect objects with chronology, cause and consequence, continuity and change, significance, and differing perspectives.

Cultural learning and heritage education

Cultural learning is a major rationale for school museums in Bhutan. UNESCO (2024, 2025) emphasises learning about, with, and through culture, including built, natural, tangible, and living heritage. Bhutanese studies suggest that local museums can help learners encounter community artefacts and oral traditions, strengthen cultural awareness, and connect generations (Dendup, 2020; Gyeltshen & Wangchuk, 2018; Tshering & Wangchuk, 2021; Wangmo & Dema, 2019). This cultural connection should not be limited to celebration or display. Students can also ask whose stories are represented, what evidence supports an interpretation, and how cultural practices have changed over time (Marcus et al., 2017).

Implementation and school context

Museum learning is shaped by the interaction of personal, sociocultural, and physical contexts (Falk & Dierking, 2016). Students' prior knowledge, peer relationships, teacher scaffolding, artefact availability, display space, and school resources can influence what they learn. Teachers in school-created museums must support collection, documentation, interpretation, display, and explanation, often without professional curatorial support. Bhutanese research identifies practical barriers involving resources, preparation, accessibility, and community participation (Dema & Gyeltshen, 2020; Dorji & Wangmo, 2021; Dorji & Zangmo, 2023; Penjor, 2020). These differences make school-level comparison important.

Research gap

Existing literature supports museums as potentially engaging, culturally grounded spaces for historical enquiry, but their value depends on instructional design and implementation. In Bhutan, further empirical evidence is useful on how students experience school-created history museums across different school settings and how those experiences relate to a museum-learning test. This study addresses that gap through a multiple-case analysis combining student questionnaire and test data with focus group and teacher-interview evidence.

METHODOLOGY

Research design

The study used a pragmatic, QUAN-dominant convergent mixed-methods multiple-case design. Quantitative evidence was the primary strand for identifying patterns and differences across schools; qualitative evidence was used to explain how students and teachers experienced museum-based learning. Mixed-methods designs are suitable when a complex educational phenomenon benefits from numerical patterns and contextual explanation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The two strands were brought together during interpretation.

Setting and participants

The study was conducted in four secondary schools in one eastern Dzongkhag of Bhutan. The quantitative sample comprised 252 Class X students. The schools are anonymised as SCHOOL 1, SCHOOL 2, SCHOOL 3, and SCHOOL 4. Five student focus-group discussions involved 25 students in total, and four history teachers

participated in semi-structured interviews. The schools were treated as separate cases because museum resources, teacher guidance, physical space, and implementation conditions differed.

School	Male	Female	Other	Student total	% of sample	Teacher interviews
SCHOOL 1	9	17	0	26	10.3	1
SCHOOL 2	14	44	0	58	23.0	1
SCHOOL 3	34	63	1	98	38.9	1
SCHOOL 4	26	44	0	70	27.8	1
Total	83	168	1	252	100.0	4

Instruments and data collection

Quantitative data were collected using a 30-item student questionnaire and a researcher-developed museum-learning test. The questionnaire used a six-point Likert scale and covered perception, learning and engagement; Bhutanese cultural and historical learning; implementation support; and technical/logistical difficulty. The museum-learning test was treated as researcher-developed rather than fully standardised because formal item-difficulty, discrimination, and external-validation evidence was unavailable. School assessment records and assessment-related questionnaire items from the original study are not analysed in this revised paper because the focus is historical learning rather than formative assessment.

Qualitative data came from five student focus-group discussions and four semi-structured interviews with history teachers. The discussions and interviews explored how artefacts related to textbook knowledge and cultural experience, how students collected and interpreted objects, and how teacher guidance, resources, space, time, and confidence shaped participation.

Data analysis

The analysis began with screening for missing values, distributions, and ceiling effects. Reliability was examined using Cronbach's alpha and McDonald's omega (McNeish, 2018). Exploratory factor analysis used Principal Axis Factoring with oblique rotation; KMO and Bartlett's tests were used to examine suitability for factor analysis (Hair et al., 2019; Watkins, 2018). School-level differences were examined using Kruskal–Wallis H tests, followed by Dunn post-hoc comparisons with Holm correction and epsilon-squared effect sizes. Spearman correlations examined associations among the student-reported constructs and museum-learning test scores. Qualitative data were analysed thematically, with attention to artefact use, cultural relevance, teacher support, resources, and learning experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2021, 2022). Quantitative and qualitative findings were integrated during interpretation.

Ethical considerations

Permission was obtained from relevant education authorities and participating schools. Students and teachers were informed about the study's purpose, voluntary participation, and confidentiality. Results were reported in aggregate, and quotations were anonymised using focus-group and teacher codes.

Results

Preliminary analysis and reliability

The dataset contained 252 student cases and no missing values in the questionnaire items or museum-learning test scores. Shapiro–Wilk tests indicated that the main composite variables departed significantly from normality, and the museum-learning test showed a ceiling effect. The overall test mean was 88.34, the median was 93.30, and the maximum was 100. These features supported the use of non-parametric tests for school comparisons.

Reliability estimates for the retained learning-related questionnaire constructs were acceptable to strong. Perception, learning, and engagement showed acceptable reliability, while Bhutanese cultural and historical learning and implementation support showed stronger internal consistency. The original exploratory factor analysis reported KMO = .919 and a significant Bartlett's test, $\chi^2 = 3827.72$, $p < .001$. Because the original factor solution included items beyond the narrower focus of this revised paper, these diagnostics are reported as part of the source study and are not interpreted as a newly estimated factor structure for the revised set of constructs.

Construct	Items	Cronbach's alpha	Omega
Perception, learning, and engagement (PLE)	8	.715	.735
Bhutanese cultural and historical learning (BCHL)	8	.827	.831
Implementation support (IS; IC1–IC6)	6	.818	.823

Students' reported experiences and test performance

Students reported generally positive museum-learning experiences. Bhutanese cultural and historical learning received the highest mean score, followed by perception, learning, and engagement. Implementation support was lower than cultural learning, suggesting that students' perceived cultural value was stronger than the consistency of support available to them. Technical/logistical difficulty was moderate, indicating that practical challenges remained part of the experience.

Variable	N	Mean	SD	Median	IQR	Min	Max
PLE	252	4.35	0.65	4.38	0.88	2.13	5.88
BCHL	252	4.79	0.58	4.88	0.75	1.50	6.00
IS	252	4.14	0.84	4.33	1.17	1.67	6.00
Technical/logistical difficulty	252	3.96	1.24	4.00	2.00	1.00	6.00
Museum-learning test	252	88.34	12.61	93.30	20.00	26.70	100.00

Note. Questionnaire constructs use a 1–6 scale; museum-learning test scores are percentages. PLE = perception, learning, and engagement; BCHL = Bhutanese cultural and historical learning; IS = implementation support.

Differences across schools

Kruskal–Wallis tests showed statistically significant school-level differences in perception, learning and engagement; Bhutanese cultural and historical learning; implementation support; and museum-learning test performance. Technical/logistical difficulty did not differ significantly across schools. The largest effects were observed for implementation support and test performance. SCHOOL 2 generally reported stronger learning-related outcomes, while SCHOOL 1 had the lowest museum-learning test mean.

Variable	H	df	p	Epsilon-squared
PLE	15.996	3	.001	.052
BCHL	23.288	3	< .001	.082
Implementation support	28.337	3	< .001	.102
Technical/logistical difficulty	6.669	3	.083	.015
Museum-learning test	33.358	3	< .001	.122

Dunn–Holm post-hoc comparisons indicated that SCHOOL 2 was significantly higher than one or more other schools on PLE, BCHL, implementation support, and test performance.

Variable	SCHOOL 3	SCHOOL 4	SCHOOL 1	SCHOOL 2
PLE	4.22	4.30	4.47	4.59
BCHL	4.71	4.68	4.71	5.10

Implementation support	3.97	4.00	4.06	4.62
Technical/logistical difficulty	3.77	3.89	4.23	4.24
Museum-learning test	85.46	89.43	82.30	94.59

Note. Questionnaire constructs are scored from 1 to 6; test scores are percentages.

Associations between reported experiences and test performance

Spearman correlations showed moderate to strong positive associations among the self-reported constructs. Perception, learning and engagement were positively associated with cultural and historical learning and implementation support. Cultural learning was also associated with implementation support. However, museum-learning test scores were not significantly associated with any self-reported construct. Students' positive perceptions and reported learning experiences therefore aligned with one another, but did not show a measurable association with test performance in this dataset.

Variable	PLE	BCHL	IS	Technical difficulty	Test
PLE		.557	.580	.361	.008
BCHL	.557		.562	.274	.100
IS	.580	.562		.502	.015
Technical difficulty	.361	.274	.502	—	−.025
Test	.008	.100	.015	−.025	—

Note. $p < .001$. Test-score correlations were non-significant.

Qualitative explanation of learning experiences

Three themes were prominent in the student and teacher accounts. First, artefacts made historical and cultural knowledge tangible. Students described objects such as traditional dress and symbols of national heritage as connecting classroom content with lived experience and cultural identity. Second, implementation support was uneven. Participants described differences in access to authentic artefacts, display space, teacher guidance, confidence, and the ability to verify objects' origins. Third, students and teachers saw value in clearer guidance for planning exhibits and explaining the historical significance of artefacts.

Theme	Illustrative evidence from the original study	Interpretation
Artefacts made history tangible	"Artefacts make history alive and relevant" (FGD3). Students also connected traditional dress and national symbols with cultural pride (FGD1).	Objects linked textbook knowledge with cultural identity and local relevance.
Implementation support was uneven	A teacher noted that some students were active while others lacked resources and confidence (T4). Students described difficulties obtaining and verifying artefacts.	Resources, confidence, teacher support, and space shaped participation and learning experiences.
Need for structured learning guidance	Teachers recommended orientation and clearer guidelines for exhibition planning (T1).	Guidance can help students explain an object's context, use, evidence, and historical significance.

The qualitative findings help explain why school-level differences were more than statistical variation. Students' experiences reflected differences in resources, confidence, display space, artefact availability, and teacher support. Participants valued museums as culturally meaningful learning environments, but the quality of learning opportunities depended on how the activity was planned and supported.

DISCUSSION

The study indicates that school history museums can provide culturally meaningful opportunities for historical learning. Students reported particularly positive experiences in Bhutanese cultural and historical learning, supporting research that views museums as places where objects, narratives, and identity can be explored together (ICOM, 2022; Marcus et al., 2017; Marovah & Ncube, 2024). The findings also align with Bhutanese scholarship on the potential of school and local museums to connect students with artefacts, oral traditions, and community histories (Dendup, 2020; Gyeltshen & Wangchuk, 2018; Tshewang & Maxwell, 2022). Artefacts appeared to make historical knowledge more concrete by linking classroom learning with familiar cultural experiences.

A central finding is that museum-learning experiences differed across schools. SCHOOL 2 had the strongest mean scores for cultural learning and implementation support and the highest test performance, whereas SCHOOL 1 had the lowest test performance. This pattern is consistent with Falk and Dierking's (2016) argument that museum learning is shaped by personal, sociocultural, and physical contexts. School context should therefore be treated as an important part of the learning environment. Access to objects, display space, teacher guidance, and student confidence may influence how fully students can engage with the past.

The findings also caution against assuming that positive self-reported experiences necessarily indicate stronger test performance. Students' reported engagement, cultural learning, and implementation support were associated with one another, but not significantly associated with museum-learning test scores. This distinction prevents an overstatement of the evidence. Students may experience an activity as meaningful or culturally relevant without those experiences being captured by a short researcher-developed test. Conversely, a test may not fully represent interpretive skills, oral explanation, or the ability to connect an object with community memory. Future work should use multiple measures of historical knowledge and historical thinking, while acknowledging the ceiling effect found in this test.

Qualitative evidence helps explain how museum activities functioned in practice. Students described artefacts as bridges between textbook knowledge and lived experience, while teachers highlighted uneven access to objects, infrastructure, and guidance. These findings reinforce the argument that school museums are pedagogical systems rather than isolated displays. Their educational value depends on how objects are selected, documented, contextualised, and discussed. A collection of objects becomes a history-learning resource when students investigate questions such as who made or used an object, when and why it was used, what evidence supports an explanation, and what it reveals about continuity and change.

For Bhutanese history education, school museums can connect national narratives with local heritage and community knowledge. This is consistent with culture and heritage education frameworks that encourage learning through tangible and intangible culture (UNESCO, 2024, 2025). However, cultural pride should be accompanied by critical enquiry. Students should be able to distinguish an object's known history from assumptions, compare accounts where appropriate, and consider which community voices are represented. Such practices can strengthen both historical understanding and respectful engagement with cultural heritage.

The study's practical implication is that teachers need support in designing museum activities around historical questions rather than display alone. Schools can provide simple artefact-recording templates that capture an object's name, source, approximate date, use, local terminology, and evidence for its interpretation. Students can then create short labels or oral explanations connecting each object to a historical theme. Where authentic artefacts are unavailable or fragile, photographs, replicas, oral histories, and carefully documented digital sources can provide alternatives. These steps may make museum learning more inclusive and reduce the burden on students who cannot easily obtain objects.

CONCLUSION

School history museums offer a promising way to make history learning tangible, culturally relevant, and enquiry-oriented. In this study, Class X students generally reported positive museum-learning experiences, particularly in Bhutanese cultural and historical learning. However, significant school-level differences in engagement, cultural learning, implementation support, and museum-learning test performance show that the benefits of museum activities are not uniform. Qualitative accounts point to artefact access, display space, teacher guidance, and student confidence as important conditions.

The study does not establish that museum activities caused higher historical knowledge, and the absence of significant correlations between self-reported experiences and test scores should be interpreted cautiously. Nevertheless, the combined evidence supports using school history museums as structured learning tools when students are guided to investigate objects, interpret evidence, and connect local heritage with wider historical developments. Museums should be integrated into curriculum planning rather than treated as decorative displays.

Limitations

The study was cross-sectional and cannot establish causal effects. Several variables were based on student self-report and may reflect differences in interpretation or social desirability. The museum-learning test was researcher-developed, was not externally validated, and showed a ceiling effect that may have limited its ability to distinguish among students with high scores. Students were nested within only four schools, limiting the scope for broader generalisation. The questionnaire's original factor structure also showed conceptual overlap among constructs. Future studies could use pre–post or longitudinal designs, include more schools across districts, and develop validated measures of historical knowledge, source interpretation, and historical thinking.

Practical Implications

First, teachers should receive professional development in artefact interpretation, historical enquiry, exhibition design, and the use of oral and material sources. Second, schools should develop simple documentation practices so that objects are accompanied by reliable information about their provenance, local names, uses, and historical significance. Third, school leaders and education authorities should support access to display space, safe storage, community collaboration, and alternatives for students who cannot obtain authentic objects. Finally, museum activities should be linked to curriculum objectives and historical questions so that students learn to explain and interpret the past, not merely arrange exhibits.

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