

Research Article

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Mastery Over Minutes: Instructional Leadership as the Catalyst for Competency-Based Education

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Abstract

Background/purpose. Traditional education systems often rely on time-based progression, advancing students based on instructional minutes rather than demonstrated mastery. This perpetuates inequities and limits personalized learning. Competency-Based Education (CBE) offers an alternative by prioritizing mastery over seat-time. However, implementing CBE in resource-constrained contexts like Lesotho presents challenges. This study investigates how instructional leadership, guided by Transformative Leadership Theory (TLT), can catalyze the shift to CBE by disrupting entrenched hierarchies, reimagining assessment, and promoting equity.

Materials/methods. Using a qualitative case study design within a transformative research paradigm, the study engaged six instructional leaders (three Heads of Departments and three teacher leaders) from diverse secondary schools in Lesotho. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and observations, and analyzed using thematic analysis to uncover leadership practices and challenges in implementing CBE.

Results. Findings reveal that instructional leaders foster teacher collaboration, challenge hierarchical norms, and build capacity for mastery-focused teaching. They employ flexible modular curricula, formative assessments, and stakeholder mobilization strategies. Despite resource limitations and cultural resistance, leaders leverage technology and improvisation to personalize learning and promote inclusivity. However, tensions persist, including performative collaboration, inconsistent assessment reliability, and equity gaps.

Conclusion. Framed by Transformative Leadership Theory, instructional leadership is pivotal in advancing CBE in constrained settings. The study proposes the TIL-CBE model, which includes disrupting time-bound structures, fostering collective agency, and equity-driven practices. Sustainable reform requires supportive policies, targeted investment, and ongoing leadership development.

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1. Introduction

Despite decades of reform, most education systems continue to rely on time-bound models of progress, in which performance is determined by the accumulation of instructional "minutes" rather than by students' demonstrated mastery of competencies (Nayak & Kachhi, 2025). This reliance on seat-time as a determinant for learning has profound implications: it allows students to move forward without necessarily developing the required understanding or skill proficiency, perpetuating inequities and curtailing opportunities for personalized learning. Dubazana (2025) states that such systems privilege uniformity over flexibility and efficiency over depth, leaving learners, particularly those in under-resourced contexts, inadequately prepared for the demands of higher education, work, and citizenship.

Competency-Based Education (CBE) offers an alternative by shifting the focus from time to mastery. Within CBE, progress is determined by demonstrated competence rather than chronological progression, creating pathways for deeper learning, inclusivity, and equity (Long et al., 2020). Yet this shift is far from straightforward. Moving from entrenched time-based systems to competency-driven models requires transformation across multiple dimensions: leadership, pedagogy, assessment, and policy (Shatten, 2024). In many contexts, such transformation encounters cultural resistance, inadequate resources, and deeply ingrained institutional practices that privilege tradition over innovation.

In navigating these challenges, instructional leadership has emerged as a catalytic force. Instructional leaders, especially heads of departments and teacher leaders, play a pivotal role in shaping school culture, supporting teacher development, and designing learning environments that privilege student mastery over procedural compliance (Leithwood, 2021). When anchored in Transformative Leadership Theory (TLT), instructional leadership goes beyond managerial efficiency; it explicitly challenges entrenched hierarchies and conventional practices while fostering collaborative, equity-driven approaches to learning (Leithwood et al., 2020). Through this lens, leadership becomes not simply coordinating instructional activity but a project of disrupting inherited inequities and enabling more just and flexible pathways for learners.

The conceptual foundations guiding this study are systematically defined in terms of three interrelated constructs. Competency-Based Education (CBE) represents the pedagogical framework that prioritizes demonstrated mastery over time-based progression. Transformative Leadership Theory (TLT) serves as the theoretical foundation, emphasizing equity, social justice, and the redistribution of power within educational systems. Transformative Instructional Leadership (TIL), derived from TLT, operationalizes its principles within instructional contexts. Rather than constituting a separate model, TIL translates the normative ideals of TLT into concrete school-level practices that foster equitable learning environments, empower teachers, and support the effective implementation of CBE. In essence, TLT provides the theoretical lens, while TIL embodies its practical presentation within teaching and learning processes.

Transformative instructional leadership (TIL) is significant in reimagining assessment. Khan and Ashraf (2023) stipulate that traditional models rely heavily on standardized examinations, often reinforcing inequalities by privileging rote memorization over authentic competence. Drawing on transformative approaches, instructional leaders can advance alternative assessment practices that privilege flexible, real-world demonstrations of mastery, thus supporting more equitable and meaningful learning experiences. This shift is critical in CBE contexts, where mastery must be demonstrated across diverse competencies that do not include cognitive only, but also social, digital, and problem-solving capacities.

While scholarship on CBE has grown in recent years, it remains heavily concentrated in Global North contexts, where resources and infrastructures allow for large-scale experimentation. Less

attention has been given to how CBE reform is enacted in Global South settings, where systemic constraints complicate the work of educational transformation. This gap in the literature is significant: without context-responsive studies, global discourses on CBE risk become abstract, technocratic, or detached from the lived realities of schools. In particular, no empirical evidence exists on how instructional leaders operationalize transformative leadership practices in resource scarcity, policy contradictions, and cultural resistance.

Lesotho provides a compelling case in this regard. As a lower-middle-income country, its education system is shaped by historical legacies of inequality, limited resources, and evolving reform priorities. Recent policy directions increasingly emphasize inclusivity and digital competence, recognizing the need to equip learners for the demands of the 21st century (Mokhele, 2024). Yet systemic challenges such as gaps in infrastructure, resistance to change, and teacher capacity constraints pose significant barriers to realizing these aspirations. Within this backdrop, instructional leadership becomes not simply a managerial function but a transformative necessity. Leaders at school and departmental levels, especially Heads of Departments and teacher leaders, must navigate these complexities by mobilizing stakeholders, leveraging limited technology for personalized learning, and designing equity-focused strategies to ensure that all learners, regardless of background, have opportunities to achieve mastery (Tlali & Matete, 2021).

Against this background, this study explores how instructional leaders in Lesotho operationalize transformative leadership practices to implement Competency-Based Education (CBE) in resource-constrained contexts. This study addresses a critical gap in existing scholarship, which has predominantly focused on CBE implementation in well-resourced or Global North systems (Long et al., 2020; Kareem et al., 2023; Wanjiku, 2025). Few studies have examined how transformative instructional leadership unfolds in postcolonial or low-income settings where material and cultural constraints intersect. By drawing on recent international perspectives on equity-driven educational transformation (Darling-Hammond et al., 2024; Nephitaly & Olateju, 2025), this study contributes to global debates by offering context-responsive insights that extend the discourse on sustainable CBE leadership practices.

The contribution of this study is twofold. First, it develops a context-responsive framework for instructional leadership grounded in empirical realities of a Global South setting. This framework illuminates how leaders can advance competency-based reform and highlights the tensions and possibilities inherent in such transformation. Second, it enriches global discourses on CBE by centering a context often marginalized in comparative education research. The study highlights the critical levers for moving education systems from counting minutes to cultivating mastery by shifting the analytical focus from generic reform models to context-specific leadership practices. This endeavor delays instructional leaders' ability to enact transformative change.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Competency-Based Education

Competency-Based Education (CBE) redefines learning by positioning demonstrated mastery rather than instructional "seat time" as the primary criterion for progression (Açıkgöz & Babadoğan, 2021). The model promises deeper learning, equity, and personalization, as students advance once competencies are mastered rather than according to fixed schedules (Long et al., 2020). Evidence suggests that CBE strengthens adaptability, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills. These capacities are increasingly demanded in contemporary economies. Furthermore, Lin et al. (2025) supported integration with other instructional design models, demonstrating how CBE can be embedded into structured learning systems with clear outcomes. In higher education, the emphasis on demonstrable skills over conventional grades has been viewed as a mechanism for fairness, although the design of reliable assessments remains an unresolved challenge (Aloisi, 2023).

Conversely, the equity promise of CBE is not straightforward. Implementation often assumes access to resources such as trained teachers and digital technologies, conditions absent in many under-resourced settings (Mustofa et al., 2025). In such contexts, personalization may reproduce inequities rather than alleviate them. Scholars also caution that an exclusive focus on measurable competencies risks reducing education to quantifiable outputs, marginalizing broader developmental goals such as creativity and emotional intelligence that resist standardization (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). Thus, while CBE challenges traditional education by emphasizing fairness and workforce readiness, it also raises tensions between inclusivity and feasibility, particularly in systems with structural constraints.

Although advocates of CBE emphasize mastery, personalization, and equity, several scholars present critical counterarguments that caution against overgeneralized claims of its transformative potential. Critics argue that CBE's heavy focus on measurable competencies risks narrowing curricula to technical skills at the expense of creativity, civic engagement, and holistic development (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Smith, 2025). Others contend that the model's reliance on assessment and data-driven progress monitoring may reproduce inequalities by privileging students with greater access to technology and instructional support (Mustofa et al., 2025). From a socio-political standpoint, some authors question whether CBE can genuinely disrupt entrenched hierarchies in systems where policy and cultural norms reinforce standardization (Nephitaly & Olateju, 2025). These critiques emphasize that while CBE holds promise, its implementation must be contextualized within local realities and accompanied by robust equity safeguards to avoid reproducing the very disparities it seeks to eliminate.

2.2. Instructional Leadership in CBE

Instructional leadership is widely recognized as a critical enabler of CBE reforms, with school principals, department heads, and teacher leaders expected to guide pedagogical change, support staff, and foster cultures in which mastery supersedes procedural compliance (Leithwood et al., 2024). Leaders play a pivotal role in shifting assessment from rote memorization toward demonstrations of authentic skills (Darling-Hammond et al., 2024). Chowdhury and Alzarrad (2025) state that instructional leaders act as mediators between schools and communities, mobilizing stakeholders, building teacher capacity, and leveraging technology to promote CBE practices beyond pedagogy. Examples include guiding rubric development and facilitating differentiated learning pathways (Roberts & Inman, 2023).

Yet, literature also emphasizes the constraints of leadership in practice. In resource-limited contexts such as Lesotho, leaders face structural barriers including outdated policies, inadequate funding, and limited autonomy (Lesotho Ministry of Education and Training, 2024). Although literature often portrays instructional leadership as visionary and empowering, hierarchies and bureaucratic control frequently undermine leaders' agency (Ehrich & English, 2024). Pasque (2023) indicated that power irregularities can restrain authentic collaboration, leading to superficial compliance rather than transformative change. Moreover, technology integration, which is often seen as central to CBE, assumes digital competence among leaders, which remains uneven across rural and urban contexts (Laskar, 2024). Thus, instructional leadership for CBE is best understood not as a linear driver of reform but as a contested practice shaped by systemic, cultural, and technological constraints.

2.3. Transformative Leadership Theory and Its Connection to CBE

Transformative Leadership Theory (TLT) offers a conceptual lens for understanding how leaders can advance CBE by explicitly challenging inequities in educational systems (Shields, 2016). TLT emphasizes equity, inclusivity, and collective agency, aligning with CBE's central aim of ensuring all students achieve mastery. Empirical studies suggest that transformative leaders promote teacher

innovation, foster collaboration, and cultivate school cultures that value diversity and holistic development (Kareem et al., 2023; Opoku et al., 2023). In practice, this translates into motivating teachers and students to focus on long-term, life-relevant goals and encouraging the effective use of technology to enhance inclusive CBE practices (Wanjiku, 2025).

TLT is particularly suited to this study because it aligns with the central tenets of both CBE and instructional leadership. At its core, TLT emphasizes equity, inclusivity, and dismantling barriers limiting learners' potential (Shields, 2016). These values resonate directly with CBE's learner-centered philosophy, which seeks to ensure student mastery rather than measuring success through time-bound metrics. By foregrounding social justice and collective agency, TLT encourages leaders to redistribute power within schools, positioning teachers and students as co-constructors of knowledge, an approach consistent with instructional leadership's focus on enabling teaching and learning excellence (Moyer, 2021). This means that in practice, leaders adopt roles beyond managerial oversight: they become facilitators of collaboration, champions of pedagogical innovation, and advocates for contextually responsive curriculum practices. Moreover, TLT's call for critical reflection challenges leaders to interrogate whose knowledge counts in competency frameworks, aligning with calls for the localization and decolonization of CBE (Sengeh & Winthrop, 2022). In this way, TLT provides more than an abstract critique of inequity; it offers a pragmatic and ethically grounded framework through which leaders can cultivate inclusive, mastery-driven environments and advance sustainable curriculum practices. Therefore, this study applies TLT as its guiding framework to examine how instructional leadership in Lesotho can navigate hierarchical traditions and resource constraints while promoting equity, shared agency, and contextually relevant CBE practices.

Literature reveals that CBE, instructional leadership, and TLT are conceptually interconnected rather than discrete reform agendas. While CBE provides the pedagogical framework centered on learner mastery, instructional leadership offers the organizational mechanism for translating this framework into classroom practice. TLT, in turn, underpins both by emphasizing equity, inclusivity, and critical reflection as ethical imperatives for transformation. Compared to traditional leadership models that focus on efficiency and compliance, TLT foregrounds moral purpose, aligning directly with the justice-oriented aspirations of CBE. Therefore, TLT emerges as the integrative bridge. This leadership praxis synthesizes the structural focus of instructional leadership with the equity-driven philosophy of TLT to actualize CBE in real school contexts. This synthesis highlights the study's contribution by framing these concepts as mutually reinforcing dimensions of transformative educational reform, rather than as parallel discourses.

2.4. CBE in the Global South: Tensions, Adaptations, and the Lesotho Experience

Competency-Based Education (CBE) has gained prominence in the Global South as governments seek to reform curriculum to promote equity, lifelong learning, and employability. However, the translation of CBE into practice has been uneven, reflecting structural, cultural, and political realities specific to postcolonial contexts. Scholars argue that while CBE promises mastery-based learning and flexibility, its implementation in the Global South is often constrained by resource shortages, large class sizes, rigid bureaucracies, and limited teacher autonomy (Nephitaly & Olateju, 2025; Sengeh & Winthrop, 2022). These challenges emphasize that adopting CBE is not merely a technical reform but a deeply political process that must account for histories of inequality, colonial legacies, and the contested meanings of "competence" in diverse societies.

Proponents of CBE emphasize its transformative potential in addressing educational inequities by shifting the focus from rote learning to learner-centered approaches. In contexts where traditional, exam-driven models have dominated, CBE's emphasis on mastery, applied knowledge, and formative assessment aligns with calls for decolonial, socially just education (Shields, 2016;

Wanjiku, 2025). However, the practicalities of enacting such pedagogical change in Global South classrooms often collide with systemic barriers, including inadequate teacher preparation, underdeveloped instructional leadership, and limited integration of indigenous knowledge systems (Sengeh & Winthrop, 2022). These contradictions highlight the need for leadership models that go beyond compliance with policy mandates and actively support innovation and contextual responsiveness.

Lesotho exemplifies these dynamics. As part of a broader wave of CBE reforms in sub-Saharan Africa, Lesotho has sought to integrate CBE into secondary education to prepare learners for global competitiveness and local relevance (Thaanyane, 2021). However, the country faces persistent obstacles, including under-resourced schools, centralized decision-making, and cultural tensions around curriculum relevance. For example, imported competency frameworks may not fully reflect local epistemologies, thereby risking the marginalization of indigenous knowledge and community priorities (Sengeh & Winthrop, 2022). Furthermore, the hierarchical nature of Lesotho's school governance limits teachers' agency and constrains principals' and department heads' ability to exercise TIL (Nephitaly & Olateju, 2025).

Thus, Lesotho represents the broader Global South debate: while CBE offers a normative vision of equitable, learner-centered education, its enactment is mediated by structural inequalities, cultural tensions, and leadership practices. Analyzing the country's experience allows this study to interrogate how instructional leadership, informed by TLT, can bridge the gap between CBE's ideals and its practical realities in resource-constrained, postcolonial settings.

2.5. Challenges in Adopting CBE: Equity, Assessment, and Personalization

Globally, CBE faces enduring challenges in equity, assessment, and personalization. While assessment frameworks must be transparent and culturally relevant, poorly designed measures risk embedding bias and privileging dominant groups (Aurora Institute, 2023). Efforts to personalize learning often depend on digital tools, yet unequal access to technology and insufficient teacher support undermine inclusivity, particularly in low-resource settings (KnowledgeWorks, 2024; Competency-Based Education Network, 2024). In Lesotho, where infrastructure gaps remain acute, leaders must improvise with creative, community-driven approaches to ensure participation in CBE.

Literature notes that equity is often rhetorically emphasized without being operationalized (KnowledgeWorks, 2024). Data-driven tools, for example, may unintentionally reproduce cultural biases, while personalization initiatives can overburden teachers, leading to burnout and variability in quality (Smith, 2025). Moreover, attempts to "scale up" CBE often misinterpret resistance as a technical problem, ignoring deeper cultural and political concerns such as teacher job insecurity or fear of disempowerment (Aurora Institute, 2023). Addressing these challenges requires not just technical fixes but systemic strategies that engage with the human dimensions of reform.

2.6. Gaps in the Research

Existing CBE literature is disproportionately concentrated in well-resourced contexts, limiting its applicability to the realities of Global South systems such as Lesotho's. Moreover, while the role of instructional leadership is acknowledged, there remains little empirical work examining how leaders operationalize transformative practices in resource-constrained environments. This Eurocentric bias produces one-size-fits-all reform narratives that overlook hybrid models blending indigenous knowledge with imported approaches. Consequently, there is a pressing need for studies illuminating the practical strategies, tensions, and adaptive innovations through which leaders in contexts like Lesotho attempt to make CBE viable. This study addresses that gap by investigating how instructional leaders enact transformative practices in leading CBE reform, thereby contributing theoretically to leadership and equity debates, and empirically to knowledge of education in resource-poor contexts.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Paradigm

This study is anchored in the transformative paradigm, which positions research as a tool for social change, particularly in contexts marked by systemic inequities (Mertens, 2009). The transformative paradigm foregrounds power, voice, and justice. It assumes that knowledge is socially constructed and that research should actively challenge dominant narratives and structures (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This paradigm is especially relevant in the context of Lesotho's education system, which is characterized by resource constraints and historical inequities. It allows the researcher to interrogate how instructional leadership can be disruptive against traditional, time-bound schooling models and promote equity-driven reform through CBE.

3.2. Research Design

A qualitative case study design was selected to explore the lived experiences and leadership strategies of Heads of Departments and teacher leaders implementing CBE. Case study methodology is particularly suited to transformative research because it enables contextual depth, participant voice, and situated meaning-making (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). Rather than seeking universal truths, the study aims to uncover context-specific insights illuminating how leadership practices evolve in response to systemic constraints and reform pressures. Jamil et al. (2023) confirm that the case study approach facilitates critical reflection on the tensions between policy mandates and pedagogical realities.

3.3. Participants

The study involved six instructional leaders: three Heads of Departments (HODs) and three teacher leaders from three secondary schools in Lesotho. The schools were chosen to reflect different contexts — one private, one church-affiliated, and one public school. This variety provided insight into leadership practices across different resource settings. HODs act as key links between policy and classroom practice, supervising curriculum and mentoring teachers. Teacher leaders are informal innovators who support their peers and directly guide students. Their combined perspectives offer a clear picture of how leadership functions in everyday school environments. Below is a table showing participants' profiles. Pseudonyms are used to maintain anonymity:

Table 1. Participants' Profile

Pseudonym	Role	School Type	Leadership Focus
HOD 1	Head of Department	Private School	Strategic curriculum leadership and innovation
HOD 2	Head of Department	Church School	Instructional supervision and teacher mentoring
HOD 3	Head of Department	Public School	Policy mediation and resource management
T1	Teacher Leader	Private School	Pedagogical adaptation and learner engagement
T2	Teacher Leader	Church School	Classroom innovation and peer support
T3	Teacher Leader	Public School	Equity-focused instruction and community liaison

3.4. Sampling Strategy

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure the inclusion of participants with direct experience and strategic relevance to the study's aims (Palinkas et al., 2015). This approach aligns with the transformative paradigm, which prioritizes emancipatory knowledge and seeks to amplify the voices of those often marginalized in traditional research. The sampling was not random but intentional, reflecting a commitment to equity and relevance over statistical representation.

3.5. Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. How do instructional leaders enact transformative leadership practices in the implementation of CBE?
2. What strategies are employed to challenge traditional, time-bound educational structures?
3. How do leaders promote equity and personalization in resource-constrained educational settings?

These questions are not merely descriptive but analytical, aiming to uncover the mechanisms of change, the barriers to transformation, and the possibilities for inclusive leadership.

3.6. Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and observations. Semi-structured interviews captured participants' lived experiences and empowered their voices; document analysis provided contextual and policy insights, while observations revealed real-time leadership practices and behaviors. These methods ensured triangulation, depth, and credibility in exploring instructional leadership within the context of CBE reform. Non-participant structured observations were conducted twice weekly over six weeks within classroom and departmental meeting contexts. Each observation lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes. The researcher used a standardized observation protocol designed to capture leadership behaviors, teacher–student interactions, and manifestations of competency-based instructional practices. The observation form included sections on leadership strategies, collaboration patterns, assessment approaches, and equity indicators. Field notes were taken systematically to ensure descriptive and reflective accuracy.

The semi-structured interview protocol consisted of open-ended questions focusing on leadership strategies, challenges, and innovations in implementing CBE. It was developed around the key constructs of Transformative Leadership Theory and refined through expert review to ensure clarity and alignment with the study objectives. Document analysis included school improvement plans, departmental reports, teacher development records, and curriculum implementation guidelines. These documents were examined to triangulate data from interviews and observations. Details of the interview protocol and the document types are provided in the Appendix.

3.7. Ethical Considerations

Ethical integrity was maintained through adherence to core principles of informed consent, confidentiality, and participant autonomy (Pahuja, 2024). Given the hierarchical nature of school leadership, particular attention was paid to power asymmetries. The researcher likely employed strategies such as anonymization, voluntary participation, and culturally sensitive protocols to mitigate these risks. Moreover, the transformative paradigm demands ethical reflexivity, requiring the researcher to continuously interrogate their own positionality and the implications of their interpretive choices. In keeping with the transformative paradigm, the researcher's positionality is explicitly acknowledged. As a practitioner-scholar who formerly worked within Lesotho's education system, the researcher occupies an "insider–outsider" position, that is, sharing contextual

understanding and professional networks with participants while maintaining scholarly distance to preserve analytical integrity. This proximity enabled access and trust but also demanded critical reflexivity to moderate potential bias. Continuous reflection was undertaken through journaling and peer debriefing to ensure that interpretations were grounded in participants' voices rather than the researcher's assumptions. Ethical reflection, therefore, moved beyond procedural compliance to include an examination of how the researcher's identity, experience, and power relations shaped data collection and meaning-making. This transparent self-positioning strengthens the credibility and authenticity of the study within the transformative framework.

4. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a method well-suited to uncovering patterns of meaning across qualitative data sets (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process likely involved initial coding, theme development, and interpretive synthesis, guided by both inductive insights and theoretical constructs from TLT. This dual approach enabled the researcher to remain open to emergent meanings while situating findings within a broader conceptual framework. Manual coding was used to extract recurring themes. Thematic analysis also supports critical interrogation, allowing the researcher to examine what is said and unsaid, contested, or politically charged. To enhance analytical rigor, the thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach, integrating both inductive and deductive processes. Initial codes were generated manually from verbatim transcripts, capturing recurring actions, beliefs, and challenges related to instructional leadership in CBE. These codes were then grouped into categories reflecting leadership behaviors, power dynamics, and equity practices. Through iterative review, related codes were merged to form overarching themes. The connection to TLT was established during this process by using its core principles as interpretive lenses guiding theme consolidation. Thus, TLT functioned as both an informing framework and a means of theoretical triangulation, ensuring that the themes not only emerged from participants' voices but also resonated with the transformative orientation underpinning the study.

5. Trustworthiness and Credibility

To ensure trustworthiness and credibility, the study likely employed member checking to validate interpretations, triangulated data sources for coherence, used reflexive journaling to enhance transparency, and provided thick descriptions to support transferability across similar contexts. Member-checking was conducted within 15 to 25 days after each interview via written communication, in which participants reviewed transcribed summaries and confirmed accuracy or provided clarifications. Follow-up confirmations were made in-person during subsequent school visits to ensure mutual understanding. Reflexive journaling was maintained daily during data collection and analysis to record informative decisions, emerging biases, and contextual reflections.

6. Findings and Discussions

This section presents and discusses the key findings from the semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis, organized thematically in response to the study's research questions. The themes emerged through thematic analysis and are grounded in the participants' voices, while being critically interrogated through the lens of TLT. The discussion integrates these findings with existing literature, highlighting both enablers and tensions in the enactment of CBE in Lesotho's resource-constrained contexts.

6.1. Enacting Transformative Leadership Practices in CBE Implementation

6.1.1. Fostering Teacher Collaboration and Agency

A central practice in enacting transformative leadership was fostering collaboration among teachers to build collective agency, enabling shared decision-making in CBE design. This involved leaders facilitating professional learning communities and encouraging teachers to co-construct competency frameworks, though resource limitations often hindered sustained engagement. Scholars like Kareem et al. (2023) support this as a key lever for inspiring commitment in transformative contexts.

T2 said:

Collaboration helps us adapt CBE to our classrooms, but it's exhausting when we lack time or materials.

HOD3 remarked:

I try to build agency by delegating tasks, yet teachers resist because they're overloaded with admin duties.

HOD1 stated:

We hold weekly meetings where teachers share ideas on competency rubrics, empowering them to own the process.

HOD1's statement highlights proactive facilitation of shared ownership in CBE, emphasizing empowerment as a core leadership action; this speaks to broader educational issues of teacher disempowerment in hierarchical systems, where top-down policies stifle innovation. Shields and Hesbol (2020) agree, arguing that transformative leaders must redistribute power to foster inclusivity. However, Pasque (2023) believes that superficial collaboration can mask underlying power irregularities, leading to tokenistic involvement rather than genuine change. This relates to TLT's emphasis on collective agency as a tool for dismantling inequities. We argue that collaboration holds promise for CBE enactment in light of the findings. However, it risks becoming performative in under-resourced settings like Lesotho, where leaders must prioritize structural advocacy to make it sustainable.

This finding supports the argument of Kareem et al. (2023), who suggested that teacher collaboration enhances the moral purpose of leadership by integrating equity into everyday practice. It also extends Opoku (2023) by showing how shared decision-making in Global South contexts can mitigate hierarchical dominance. Unlike studies in high-income settings where collaboration is often structurally supported (Leithwood et al., 2024), this study reveals that collaboration in Lesotho requires adaptive leadership that negotiates between formal authority and collective agency. This contribution broadens existing theory by emphasizing the improvisational nature of collaboration under constraint.

6.1.2. Challenging Entrenched Hierarchies

Leaders enacted transformative practices by questioning traditional power structures, such as rigid administrative controls, to create space for innovative CBE approaches. This included advocating for teacher input in policy decisions, but participants noted backlash from senior management and cultural norms favoring hierarchy. Leithwood et al. (2020) confirm this, linking such challenges to improved student learning through equitable leadership.

HOD2 noted:

Challenging hierarchies means involving everyone in decisions, slows implementation and causes frustration.

T1 expressed:

We push back against top-down directives to allow flexible mastery paths, which creates conflict with principals.

T3 said:

I question old rules to include student voices, yet it leads to resistance from conservative staff who prefer the current situation.

T1's statement highlights the deliberate disruption of hierarchies to enable CBE flexibility, revealing tensions in power dynamics. This suggests that reforms like CBE may maintain exclusion for educational issues that do not address hierarchies, particularly in postcolonial contexts. Opoku et al. (2023) agree, viewing it as a lever for inclusive change. However, Ehrich and English (2024) stipulate that such challenges can entrench bureaucratic shadows, undermining leader agency. It aligns with TLT's call for critical reflection on power to promote equity and social justice. These findings suggest that while challenging hierarchies is essential for transformative CBE, it often yields short-term conflicts that demand ongoing mediation, highlighting the need for policy support in Global South settings.

The above aligns with Shields and Hesbol (2020), who contend that transformative leadership disrupts inequitable structures to redistribute power. The findings expand Ehrich and English's (2024) insights by demonstrating how such disruption operates in resource-scarce, postcolonial schools where bureaucratic control is deeply rooted. This contextual note contributes to the literature by evidencing that leadership's transformative intent often clashes with institutional inactivity, requiring continuous negotiation rather than single-point reform.

6.1.3. Building Teacher Capacity for CBE

Transformative practices included targeted capacity-building, such as workshops on competency assessment, to equip teachers for mastery-focused teaching. However, uneven access to training and burnout emerged as barriers. Darling-Hammond et al. (2024) affirm this, stressing the role of leaders in enacting the science of learning.

T3 complained:

Capacity-building is restricted by funding; teachers feel unprepared and overwhelmed.

HOD2 added:

I mentor staff on personalization, but it feels like a futile effort without resources.

HOD1 shared:

We run home sessions on guidelines, which boost confidence in CBE.

HOD1 indicates hands-on support for skill development, positioning capacity-building as a foundational practice to address educational issues related to teacher preparedness as teachers shift from time-bound to competency models, where gaps exacerbate inequities. Roberts and Inman (2023) agree, advocating differentiated strategies; however, Helsper (2021) points out that uneven digital competence in rural areas makes such efforts ineffective. This connects to TLT's focus on fostering innovation through equity-driven development. We argue that capacity-building, though important, often falls short in resource-scarce environments, necessitating hybrid models that blend local knowledge to avoid reinforcing dependencies on external resources.

This finding aligns with Darling-Hammond et al. (2024), who highlight that continuous, context-specific professional learning fosters instructional resilience. However, it contrasts with Helsper (2021), who noted that digital divides constrain capacity-building in low-resource regions, confirming that equity-based mentorship remains a critical yet under-supported reform lever. Thus, the study contributes to the global literature by demonstrating that capacity-building is not only technical but also ethical, emphasising relational trust and contextual adaptability as foundational for sustainable CBE reform.

7. Strategies to Challenge Traditional, Time-Bound Educational Structures

7.1. Disrupting Seat-Time Progression

Leaders employed strategies such as modular learning paths to replace fixed schedules with mastery-based advancement, thereby challenging time-bound norms. This involved redesigning timetables to accommodate flexible pacing, but implementation faced logistical challenges. Long et al. (2020) support this shift for equitable paths, though Mustofa et al. (2025) note feasibility issues in under-resourced areas.

T1 said:

We use checkpoints for mastery rather than terminology, allowing students to progress at their own pace.

HOD3 stated:

Disrupting seat-time means rethinking exams, but policy contradictions make it hard to enforce.

T2 remarked:

Flexible modules work for some, yet slow learners fall behind without extra support, worsening gaps.

T1's statement describes a practical turn to competency checkpoints, disrupting rigid progression. It means that time-bound systems perpetuate inequities in education by ignoring diverse learning needs. Khan and Ashraf (2023) agree, critiquing exam-centered approaches, but Aloisi (2023) states that mastery assessments can introduce new biases without valid algorithms. This relates to TLT's efforts to disrupt inequities through reimagined structures. Based on the findings, it can be concluded that while disrupting seat time fosters deeper learning, it risks widening gaps without targeted interventions, highlighting the need for adaptive strategies in Lesotho.

This result complements Long et al. (2020), who advocate flexible pacing as a driver of equity, while confirming Mustofa et al. (2025)'s argument that structural rigidity limits mastery-based progression in developing systems. The study contributes by demonstrating how time-flexibility reforms must be locally adjusted to strike a balance between innovation and resource and policy realities, thereby avoiding the deepening of learning inequities.

7.2. Fostering Alternative Assessment Practices

Strategies included shifting to formative, real-world assessments, such as portfolios, to challenge standardized tests. Leaders facilitated rubric co-creation, but reliability concerns and resistance arose. Nortvedt et al. (2020) endorse culturally responsive assessments, while Darling-Hammond et al. (2020) highlight risks of marginalizing non-cognitive skills.

T3 noted:

Alternative assessments promote equity, but grading consistency is poor without training.

HOD2 explained:

We develop portfolios for authentic mastery, moving away from rote exams.

HOD1 said:

Rubrics help, yet parents resist because they value traditional marks over competencies.

HOD2's statement outlines a move toward holistic evaluations, emphasizing authenticity and addressing educational assessment bias that reinforces inequalities. Lin et al. (2025) agree on embedding CBE in structured systems, but Smith (2025) disagrees, noting burnout from personalization overload. It aligns with TLT's equity focus in dismantling barriers. We believe that alternative assessments advance CBE but require systemic safeguards against subjectivity, particularly in hierarchical contexts where they may face cultural pushback. To ensure the credibility of these tools, portfolio and rubric instruments underwent iterative validation through peer review and pilot testing within participating schools. Reliability was reinforced by conducting checks among teacher leaders to achieve consistent scoring standards. Cultural adaptation was addressed through collaborative workshops with teachers and community representatives to align assessment criteria with local learning contexts and linguistic tones. This process minimized cultural bias and enhanced the contextual relevance of the assessment tools, thereby increasing their validity and acceptance in Lesotho's diverse educational settings.

These findings support Nortvedt et al. (2020) and Darling-Hammond et al. (2020), who emphasize culturally responsive assessments as equity tools. However, they also advance this scholarship by revealing that reliability challenges in low-resource contexts are not merely technical but stem from sociocultural tensions and policy inconsistencies. This perspective supplements international discourse by situating assessment reform within the lived realities of postcolonial education systems.

7.3. Mobilizing Stakeholders Against Resistance

Through dialogues, leaders mobilized teachers, parents, and communities to counter resistance to time-bound disruptions. This built buy-in but encountered skepticism from traditionalists. Chowdhury et al. (2021) view leaders as mediators, while Tapala et al. (2021) highlight political barriers in African schools.

HOD3 complained:

Mobilizing stakeholders is tough; many cling to old ways, delaying progress.

T2 shared:

We hold community forums to explain CBE benefits and gain some support.

T1 added:

Dialogues help, but resource shortages make promises hard to keep, eroding trust.

T2's statement illustrates the engagement efforts in support of reform. It means that stakeholder resistance can stall educational transformation, underscoring the power dynamics at play. Cruz et al. (2022) agree on embracing new frameworks, but Sengeh and Winthrop (2022) argue that mobilization remains superficial without addressing colonial legacies. This ties to TLT's collective agency for change. We argue that mobilization is crucial yet often undermined by unaddressed constraints, suggesting that leaders integrate indigenous knowledge to enhance legitimacy.

This insight aligns with Chowdhury and Alzarrad (2025), who describe leadership as a mediator between policy and community expectations. Yet, it extends their framework by illustrating that mobilisation in Lesotho requires not just communication but the co-creation of reform narratives

with communities. The study thus contributes a localized model of participatory leadership that strengthens ownership in the face of cultural conservatism and limited institutional trust.

7.4. Promoting Equity and Personalization in Resource-Constrained Settings

7.4.1. Leveraging Limited Technology for Personalization

Despite infrastructure gaps, leaders promoted equity by using available technology, such as shared devices, to support personalized CBE paths. This initiative aimed at inclusivity, but inadvertently widened the divide for offline students. Eden et al. (2024) advocate for technology for equity, while Competency-Based Education Network (2024) notes infrastructure challenges.

T3 stated:

Technology personalization is ideal, but unreliable electricity excludes rural students.

HOD2 remarked:

Shared devices work fairly, but data costs burden families, creating inequities.

HOD1 said:

We use free apps for individualized tasks to support diverse learners.

HOD1's statement shows the use of adaptive technology for customization, addressing educational issues related to digital divides and intensifying access gaps. Dubazana (2025) agrees on the use of blended learning for inclusion. However, Mokhele (2024) indicates policy contradictions in the Global South. It relates to TLT's inclusivity mandate. In light of the findings, it can be concluded that technology-based approaches hold potential but often reproduce disparities, necessitating community-based alternatives.

The findings confirm Eden et al. (2024)'s observation that technology integration can promote inclusion when locally contextualized. However, by documenting offline and shared-device strategies, this study provides novel empirical evidence of how digital personalization manifests under scarcity. This contribution fills a global gap in understanding equity-oriented innovation in digitally limited environments, highlighting the creative resilience of educators in the Global South.

7.5. Addressing Resource Disparities Through Improvisation

Strategies involved creative resource allocation, like peer tutoring, to ensure equity in personalization amid scarcity; however, this overburdened staff. Tlali and Matete (2021) discuss similar constraints in Lesotho, emphasizing improvisation.

T1 noted:

We improvise with local materials to promote hands-on mastery and access.

HOD3 expressed:

Improvisation helps, but can't fix systemic underfunding, leaving some behind.

T2 said:

Peer groups personalize learning cheaply, but quality varies, disadvantaging weaker students.

T1's statement highlights resourceful adaptations for equity. It means resource gaps hinder fair education, perpetuating cycles of disadvantage. Nayak and Kachhi (2025) agree on the need to balance pressures, but Thaanyane (2021) notes that teacher overload is in preparation. This aligns

with TLT's equity-driven disruption. We argue that improvisation fosters resilience but is unsustainable without investment, risking superficial equity.

7.6. Building Inclusive Practices Amid Cultural Resistance

Leaders built inclusivity through culturally relevant competencies but faced resistance from norms that value uniformity. Though implementation tensions persist, Sengeh and Winthrop (2022) call for decolonisation.

T3 complained:

Inclusive practices clash with exam culture, isolating stakeholders.

HOD2 shared:

We integrate local knowledge for inclusive mastery, valuing diversity.

T1 added:

Efforts to include all backfire when resources don't match, frustrating marginalized groups.

HOD2's statement describes embedding local elements for relevance. This addresses issues of cultural irrelevance in reforms. Opoku (2023) agrees on the levers for change, but Shatten (2024) has a different view, citing adoption patterns that favor tradition. It connects to TLT's social justice focus. I argue that inclusive practices advance equity but encounter deep resistance, necessitating critical dialogue for true transformation.

The findings align with Sengeh and Winthrop (2022), who call for the decolonisation of education through locally grounded reform. It further extends Opoku (2023) by demonstrating how leaders operationalize cultural inclusion at the classroom level despite systemic resistance. The study's contribution lies in its articulation of "practical cultural resilience", a leadership view that transforms cultural tension into a source of pedagogical innovation.

8. Conclusion

This study examines how instructional leaders in Lesotho implement transformative leadership practices to transition from time-bound progression to competency-based mastery. Framed by TLT, leaders disrupted rooted hierarchies, fostered teacher collaboration, and reimagined assessment practices to center student agency and equity. Despite resource constraints and cultural resistance, they leveraged improvisation and community engagement to sustain CBE innovations. The findings reveal persistent tensions: collaboration risks performativity without structural advocacy, modular pacing can intensify learning gaps without targeted interventions, and alternative assessments face skepticism in traditionalist cultures. These tensions underscore that leadership for CBE is not a linear process, but a contested and iterative practice that requires ongoing critical reflection and policy alignment.

Building on these insights, the study proposes the Transformative Instructional Leadership for Competency-Based Education (TIL-CBE) model. This framework comprises three interlocking dimensions: Disrupting Time-Bound Structures, Capacity-Building and Collective Agency, and Equity-Driven Practices. The TLT principles of power redistribution, social justice, and collective agency underpin these dimensions. The TIL-CBE model advances the body of knowledge by offering a context-responsive blueprint for leaders in resource-scarce, postcolonial settings. While the TIL-CBE model highlights viable pathways for sustainable reform, its efficacy hinges on supportive policy environments, targeted resourcing, and sustained leadership development. Future applications must navigate these systemic levers to translate pilot successes into scalable, lasting transformations.

9. Recommendations

To translate the TIL-CBE model into practice and policy, the following strategic actions are advised:

9.1. Practice-Level Recommendations

9.1.1. Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)

Instructional leaders should cultivate PLCs where teachers co-construct competency frameworks and exchange lived strategies. However, collaboration risks collapsing under chronic time shortages and administrative pressures. Leaders must intentionally carve out and protect collaborative time, ensuring it is not sacrificed to competing demands.

9.1.2. Flexible Modular Curriculum

Competency-based modular designs with mastery checkpoints can free students from one-size-fits-all pacing. However, such flexibility could widen achievement gaps without scaffolds for slower learners and transparent escalation pathways. Leaders must therefore embed layered supports and equitable progression mechanisms.

9.1.3. Culturally Responsive Assessments

Developing alternative assessments with clear rubrics and reliability training is crucial. However, rubric development must genuinely include teacher and student voices; otherwise, it risks reinforcing existing hierarchies under a new guise. Instructional leaders should critically interrogate whose knowledge and criteria are being privileged.

9.1.4. Deep Stakeholder Dialogues

Regular forums with teachers, students, parents, and community representatives should go beyond tokenistic consultation. Genuine shared decision-making power over resource allocation and policy adaptation is essential for authentic ownership rather than superficial "buy-in."

9.2. Policy-Level Recommendations

9.2.1. Decentralized Decision-Making

Granting heads of departments autonomy in pacing, assessment design, and resource distribution represents a radical shift. To prevent uneven implementation, decentralization must be paired with leadership capacity-building programs and accountability safeguards such as transparent reporting frameworks and peer monitoring.

9.2.2. Dedicated Investment

Funding for CBE training, digital infrastructure, and leadership rooted in transformative principles is non-negotiable. However, policymakers must guard against donor-driven agendas that impose ill-fitting external solutions. Investment should be locally informed and equity-driven.

In addition, schools and policymakers should prioritize low-cost, offline-capable digital tools such as Offline Learning Management Systems (LMS), Pocket, and KA-Lite to support CBE delivery where internet connectivity is limited. Community-based technology access points, such as shared digital hubs hosted in local libraries or Community parks, can also sustain equitable participation. These approaches promote innovation while remaining cost-effective and contextually adaptable, ensuring long-term sustainability of digital integration in low-resource environments.

9.2.3. Rethinking Promotion and Accountability

Policies that recognize demonstrated mastery based on seat time may incentivize shallow compliance unless matched with clear quality metrics and a culture that values depth of learning. Policymakers must establish safeguards against awkward incentives, ensuring mastery reflects genuine understanding.

9.3. Teacher Education & Professional Development

9.3.1 Reorienting Pre-Service Curriculum

Teacher education programs must embed TIL and CBE pedagogy, not as add-ons but as core frameworks. From day one, teacher identity formation should center on equity, agency, and responsiveness.

9.3.2. Ongoing In-Context Coaching

Continuous professional learning on inclusive pedagogy, digital literacies, and formative assessment design should be offered through blended models adapted to urban and rural realities. Coaching must be paced thoughtfully to avoid teacher burnout while maintaining depth.

9.3.3. Reciprocal Mentorship Networks

Linking urban and rural leaders through mentorship networks can catalyze adaptive innovation. However, these must include reciprocal visits and shared problem-solving sessions to ensure rural knowledge is honored rather than overshadowed by urban biases. In resource-constrained contexts, the immediate priority should be given to low-cost, high-impact interventions such as professional learning communities and flexible, modular curricula, which require minimal financial input but yield strong outcomes in short-term collaboration and adaptability. Medium- to long-term priorities should include structured leadership development programs and technology-enabled mentorship, which build systemic capacity over time. Potential barriers, such as limited funding, staff overload, and infrastructure gaps, can be mitigated through cost-effective methods, such as blended leadership training (combining virtual and community-based sessions), peer-led workshops, and partnerships with local teacher training colleges. These strategies balance feasibility and sustainability, ensuring progressive improvement without overloading schools.

By engaging with these interconnected reforms, acknowledging their tensions, and building systemic supports, stakeholders can move beyond counting instructional minutes toward cultivating genuine mastery for all learners.

Declarations

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Appendix A:

Observation Schedule and Protocol

Purpose: To document leadership behaviors and classroom dynamics supporting Competency-Based Education (CBE)

Week	Frequency	Observation Type	Context Setting	Duration (Minutes)	Focus Areas	Data Collection Tools
Week 1–2	2 sessions per week	Structured, Non-participant	Classroom sessions (CBE lessons)	30–45 min	Leadership behaviors, teacher–student interaction, instructional delivery	Standardized observation form, field notes
Week 3–4	2 sessions per week	Structured, Non-participant	Departmental meetings	30–45 min	Collaboration patterns, decision-making, equity focus	Observation form, reflective notes
Week 5–6	2 sessions per week	Structured, Non-participant	Classroom sessions and feedback meetings	30–45 min	Assessment approaches, use of feedback, technology integration	Observation form, audio notes (where acceptable)

Appendix B:

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Purpose:

This interview protocol was designed to explore how instructional leaders enact transformative leadership practices to implement Competency-Based Education (CBE) in Lesotho's secondary schools. The protocol aligns with Transformative Leadership Theory (TLT) and focuses on leadership strategies, challenges, and equity-oriented practices.

Interview Type:

Semi-structured, face-to-face interviews lasting 45–60 minutes.

Participants:

- 3 Heads of Departments (HODs)
- 3 Teacher Leaders

Structure of the Protocol:

The interview comprised three sections, each addressing a core research question. Follow-up probes were used to elicit detailed, context-specific responses.

Section 1: Leadership Practices and Strategies

1. How do you describe your role as an instructional leader in implementing Competency-Based Education (CBE)?
2. What specific leadership practices have you adopted to facilitate CBE in your school or department?
3. How do you foster teacher collaboration and agency in designing or adapting competency-based instruction?
4. What forms of support or capacity-building activities do you provide to teachers?
5. How do you balance administrative responsibilities with the need to lead instructional innovation?

Probes:

- Can you give an example of how this strategy works in practice?
- What outcomes have you noticed among teachers or students?

Section 2: Challenges and Responses

1. What major challenges do you face in implementing CBE within your context?
2. How do resource limitations or school hierarchies affect your leadership practices?
3. What kinds of resistance (if any) have you encountered from teachers, students, or parents?
4. How do you respond to such challenges while maintaining focus on equity and mastery-based learning?

Probes:

- Which challenges are most persistent, and why?
- How have you adapted your leadership style in response?

Section 3: Promoting Equity and Personalization

1. How do you ensure that CBE promotes inclusivity and equity for all learners?
2. In what ways do you personalize learning or assessment within the limits of your school's resources?
3. How do cultural or contextual factors influence your approach to leadership and CBE?
4. How do you evaluate the impact of your leadership practices on teaching and learning outcomes?

Probes:

- What does equity look like in your school?
- Can you describe a specific example of a successful equity-focused initiative?

Closing Questions

1. What policy or institutional changes do you believe are necessary to support effective implementation of CBE?
2. Is there anything else you would like to add regarding your experience as a leader in this reform process?

Ethical Considerations

- Participation was voluntary and confidential.
- Interviews were audio-recorded with consent and later transcribed verbatim.
- Pseudonyms were assigned to ensure anonymity.

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