PROMOTING GENDER EQUALITY AND SOCIAL INCLUSION IN SCHOOLS BUILDING ON WHAT CHILDREN VALUE AND ASPIRE TO DO AND BE

Assessing School Children's Valued Educational Capabilities Through Capability Approach

BASELINE REPORT FROM BHUTANESE SCHOOLS 2025

Samtse College of Education

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GLOSSARY

BEB:	Bhutan Education Blueprint
CA:	Capability Approach
CCD:	Community-Driven Development
CVEC:	Children's Valued Educational Capabilities
EU:	European Union
GEMR:	Global Education Monitoring Report
GESI:	Gender Equality and Social Inclusion
GNH:	Gross National Happiness
HSS:	Higher Secondary School
IEP:	Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy
MoE:	Ministry of Education
MoESD:	Ministry of Education and Skills Development
MSS:	Middle Secondary School
NCWC:	National Commission for Women and Children
NEP:	National Education Policy
NGEP:	National Gender Equality Policy
PAR:	Participatory Action Research
PCAL:	Penden Cement Authority Limited
PTA:	Parent-Teacher Meetings
SAS:	Situational Analysis Study
UNDP:	United Nations Development Programme
UNCRC:	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

SUMMARY

Well-being is a multifaceted construct that is used across disciplines to portray a state of wellness, health, and happiness. Using Participatory action research (PAR), this baseline study applied CA to evaluate children's assessments of the availability, satisfaction, and perceived importance of the resources within school settings to understand how these contribute to their overall well-being. Additionally, it examined children's perceptions of agency and wellbeing by focusing on the sixteen valued educational capabilities identified through a situational analysis conducted in five secondary schools within Samtse Dzongkhag (District). Furthermore, it explored how these capabilities are developed and supported in Bhutanese educational settings. Their perceptions were evaluated using the four core wellbeing metrics of CA: i) Wellbeing Freedom; ii) Well-being Achievement; iii) Agency Freedom; and iv) Agency Achievement. The survey data were collected from 200 students of Grades 1-10 which were supported by field observation data. The findings revealed that children perceived high availability and importance of resources related to key capabilities such as education (M=4.30), nutritional well-being (M=4.64), protection from economic and non-economic exploitation (M=4.47), and emotional support including love, care, and respect (M=4.40). However, satisfaction with physical health resources, particularly playgrounds, was relatively low (M=3.71). Although toilet facilities were reported as highly available (M=4.82), satisfaction with their condition and usability was significantly low (M=2.89). Disabled-friendly infrastructure showed alarmingly low availability (M=3.20) and satisfaction (M=3.13), despite its high perceived importance (M=4.59). These gaps highlight the need for targeted infrastructural improvements. Therefore, this study recommends that schools prioritise investment in enhancing the quality, accessibility, and usability of physical infrastructure particularly toilet facilities and inclusive school facilities to foster an equitable and supportive learning environment for all students.

This section analyzed 16 capabilities and their items across four core wellbeing metrics of the Capability Approach (CA): (i) Wellbeing Freedom (WF); (ii) Wellbeing Achievement (WA); (iii) Agency Freedom (AF); and (iv) Agency Achievement (AA).

The item-wise analysis of mean scores revealed that students scored highest in the subdomain Love for within the capability Love, Care, and Respect, with the item *"I … love my parents"* receiving mean scores of 9.71 (WF), 9.75 (WA), 9.74 (AF), and 9.77 (AA), indicating strong positive feelings and consistent responses across all dimensions. For the capability Social Relations, the item *"I … make/made friends"* recorded the highest mean scores, 9.72 (WF) and 9.69 (WA), highlighting students' positive engagement in peer relationships.

In contrast, the capability Aspiration showed the lowest mean score for the item *"I … envision/envisioned what I would like to be in the future"* with 7.74 (WF), while the highest score in this domain was for *"I … dream/dreamt about my future"* in Agency Achievement (AA = 9.51), suggesting that students' aspirations are stronger in terms of agency than freedom. For Mental Wellbeing, the item *"I … feel/felt scared or afraid when I'm in school"* had the lowest mean

scores, 7.23 (WA) and 7.33 (AA), indicating areas of concern for students' emotional safety and comfort in the school environment. Overall, the item-wise analysis highlights that while students feel most confident in expressing love and forming social relationships, lower scores in aspiration and mental wellbeing suggest the need for targeted interventions to strengthen autonomy, future planning, and emotional support.

Although mean scores per average item across the 16 capabilities vary widely, they reflect notable differences across subdomains and capabilities. For Wellbeing Freedom (WF), scores range from 28.06 for the subdomain *Education as Success* to 73.54 for the capability *Bodily Integrity* (28.06–73.54). For Wellbeing Achievement (WA), scores range from 27.86 for *Education as Future* to 72.57 for *Bodily Integrity* (27.86–72.57). Agency Freedom (AF) ranges from 28.50 for *Education as Success* to 73.09 for *Bodily Integrity* (28.50–73.09), while Agency Achievement (AA) ranges from 27.39 for *Education as Future* to 71.64 for *Bodily Integrity* (27.39–71.64). Individual capabilities were measured by 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, or 8 items.

The overall mean score across the 16 capabilities is 47.40 (*Wellbeing Achievement*), slightly higher than *Wellbeing Freedom* (47.18). These scores indicate that students' achievement in wellbeing is somewhat stronger than their freedom, suggesting limited opportunities to exercise autonomy, which constrains overall wellbeing outcomes. The relatively higher Agency scores (47.40–47.46) indicate that students demonstrate a fair sense of choice and accomplishment in areas such as personal expression and aspirations. Yet, autonomy and decision-making remain only moderately developed, highlighting the need for targeted interventions to strengthen student voice and participation.

Overall, the findings suggest that Bhutanese students generally thrive in safe, inclusive, and supportive environments where wellbeing and agency are nurtured. However, the relatively lower scores in mobility, autonomy, and independent decision-making underscore areas for targeted interventions to enhance students' capability for self-directed growth.

Keywords: Capability, Children, Functionings, Well-being, Agency, Freedom, Achievement

INTRODUCTION

Well-being is a multifaceted construct that is used across disciplines to portray a state of wellness, health, and happiness. Studies acknowledge that well-being is a complex, confusing, and contested field requiring a robust framework for its evaluation (Knight & McNaught, 2011). One of the widely adopted approaches to understanding well-being is Sen's Capability Approach (CA). Sen asserts that when evaluating well-being, the most important aspect is to consider what people are actually able to do and be. As an evaluative framework, CA emphasises that social, political, and economic arrangements should be assessed based on the real freedoms or capabilities individuals have to achieve valued functionings in life (Sen, 1980;1985; 1999; 2004; 2005).

CA as an evaluative framework was introduced in 1979 for assessing individual well-being (Sen, 1980). Since then, several agencies have applied it to evaluate individual well-being and social justice. For instance, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has used the approach to analyse human development such as people's life expectancy at birth, education (measured by adult literacy and educational enrollment rates), and adjusted real GDP per capita, providing a more comprehensive alternative indicator to measure material aspects of welfare. It has also been used as a normative basis for assessing the fairness and morality of social justice (Claassen, 2018; Nussbaum, 2006) and identifying the rich (Robeynes, 2017). Specifically, Schweiger and Graf (2015) examined child poverty as a topic of social justice using CA. They posit that while the CA may not give an exact numerical measure like income levels do, it is a powerful lens to critique and understand child poverty. In doing this,they opined that those functionings and capabilities that matter for justice as well as the thresholds for them must be clearly selected and contextually defined. Additionally, Garnham (1990) used CA to address mass communication challenges and revealed that it helped in promoting well-being by focusing on people's social potential (*functionings,* that is, what people are able to do and be), rather than on conventional metrics such as money or pleasure. He also emphasised that CA helps identify and eliminate barriers to communication access and opportunity, supporting the development of policies aimed at addressing inequalities in communication. Other uses of CA combine both theoretical and empirical research such as the study on disadvantage (Wolf & De-Shalit, 2007).

During the pandemic, in order to tackle marginalisation through social innovation, CA was applied to examine the European Union (EU) social innovation policy agenda from a capabilities perspective (Von Jacobi et al., 2017). They reveal that current EU social innovation strategies risk maintaining the status quo and that genuine empowerment requires deeper structural transformation and participation. Likewise, Willand et al. (2021) used CA to evaluate local policies and initiatives aimed at addressing energy vulnerability. Their study highlights resource limitations and emphasises security, agency, and contextual understanding in energy policy.
CA was also employed to understand the role of education in promoting human flourishing (DrËze & Sen 2013; Hart, 2009). Such an approach has placed children at centre stage by focusing on the processes whereby they flourish because of the opportunities provided by the school, in turn allowing children to value and aspire what they want to be and to become (Hart & Brando, 2018). In essence, these studies echoed that CA was successful in unraveling policy

shortfalls in fostering real freedoms and capabilities, thereby, offering a critical lens for designing more effective, inclusive, and equitable interventions.

Considering the above successful applications, using Participatory action research (PAR), this baseline study applied CA to evaluate children's assessments of the availability, satisfaction, and perceived importance of the resources within school settings to understand how these contribute to enhancing safe, inclusive, and equitable school environments. Additionally, it assessed children's perceptions of agency and well-being, freedom and achievement, focusing on sixteen valued educational capabilities identified through a situational analysis conducted in five secondary schools in Samtse Dzongkhag (District). Furthermore, It explored how these capabilities are developed and supported in Bhutanese educational settings. Their perceptions were evaluated using the four core well-being metrics of CA: i) Well-being Freedom; ii) Well-being, Achievement; iii) Agency Freedom; and iv) Agency Achievement. This research addresses a significant gap, as no such study has yet been conducted within the Bhutanese school context.

The underlying significance of this study is to develop interventions and activities that can be implemented and mobilised in the five schools and beyond to advance Gender equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) focusing on 16 capabilities with an overall purpose to promote well-being. In addition, the study may have implications for refining curriculum and educational policies based on its outcome. Moreover, interventions that can be applied across various grade levels of school settings to promote children's well-being, with a particular focus on their valued educational capabilities will be developed.

Research Question

1. What is school children's perception of availability, satisfaction and importance of resources in supporting their valued educational capabilities?

2. How can the valued educational capabilities of children be assessed?

3. How are agency and well-being developed and supported in Bhutanese school settings?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction to Capability approach, its components, meaning and importance

Sen (1999) introduced the Capability Approach (CA) as a framework for evaluating individual well-being. It was introduced to address the limitations of conventional welfare economics by focusing not merely on the resources people possess, but also on what individuals are actually able to do and be, which is referred to as their *functionings*.

In this regard, the perspective shifts focus from just access to resources or economic indicators to the actual opportunities people have to live meaningful lives. Capabilities can be further divided into basic and general types. Basic capabilities are those necessary for survival and escaping poverty, while general capabilities include broader aspects such as health, education, and social relationships (Robeyns, 2003). In the context of GESI, CA offers a valuable lens to evaluate not just formal access to services or rights, but the real freedoms that marginalised groups, especially women and girls, experience in their everyday lives.

In education, CA allows researchers to use it as an evaluative space for understanding the role of education in promoting human flourishing (Drèze & Sen, 2013; Hart, 2009; Walker & Unterhalter, 2007). Hart and Brando (2018) further echoed that CA allows researchers to move beyond an outcome-based understanding of schooling, allowing the researchers to focus on the processes whereby children flourish and the opportunities that the school offers children to be and to become what they value and aspire. Thus, CA provides alternative guidelines for shaping education policies that put the children (in all their facets) at the forefront.

Further, Kuklys and Robeyns (2005) argue that Sen's CA provides a valuable framework for assessing individual welfare and social conditions including a theoretical basis for analysing inequality, poverty, and public policy. They explain that CA allows well-being to be evaluated through two core concepts: functionings and capabilities.

Functionings refer to the actual "beings and doings" of a person. For example, such as being well-nourished, having shelter, or being mobile. These stand out from the resources used to achieve them (e.g., riding a bicycle versus owning one). In this context, Garhen (1997) emphasised that when evaluating well-being, varied and relevant elements need to be assessed including morbidity, mortality, adequate nourishment, mobility, happiness, self-respect, and participation in community life.
Capabilities, on the other hand, is a set of valuable functionings or opportunities a person may possess to achieve, a life they have reason to value. Different scholars have identified and classified varying sets of capabilities. These include:

- Nussbaum (2011) identifies capabilities such as bodily health, bodily integrity, senses, imagination and thought, emotions, practical reason, affiliation, other species, play, and control over one's environment. Her list offers a useful benchmark for identifying gender inequality and exclusion across societies. However, critics argue that this universal

approach can sometimes overlook local meanings of well-being or the power dynamics that affect people's choices (Staveren, 2008).

- Clark (2005) classifies health, knowledge, freedom, employment, leisure, housing, environment, and income.
- Alkire (2002) adds dimensions like education, living standards, empowerment, safety from violence, and relationships.
- Robeyns (2005) proposes additional capabilities such as political empowerment and material control. She argues that any capability list should meet several criteria including should be explicit, backed by a clear method, flexible in how general or specific it is, and as comprehensive as possible without oversimplifying human experience. This balanced approach is especially helpful for GESI within the Bhutanese context, as it supports both local relevance and careful, structured evaluation of gender and social inequalities.
- Within the context of Bhutan, Ura et al. (2012) propose a multidimensional index to measure happiness, and it comprises domains such as psychological well-being, health, time use and balance, education, cultural diversity and resilience, good governance, community vitality, ecological diversity and resilience, and living standard.

Together, these approaches show how flexible and powerful the CA framework can be for understanding inequality. Sen's focus on context supports participatory and inclusive ways of identifying what matters to different groups. Nussbaum's list gives a clear standard for comparing inequality across places. Robeyns adds a practical, balanced method that works well for applied GESI research.

Although Sen propounded the concept of CA and emphasised the importance of capabilities, he deliberately avoided providing a fixed list as he felt that it should be left at the discretion of people concerned to determine their relevance and contextually appropriate capabilities.
In more recent work, Sen (2016) describes CA as an intellectual discipline which focuses on evaluating people's achievements and freedoms in terms of their real ability to do and be the things they have reason to value. He reiterates that CA is concerned with the quality-of-life individuals are able to achieve and the freedoms they enjoy in pursuing different ways of living. Sen further expands this idea to include multiple capabilities such as literacy, health, and political freedom, emphasising the need to analyse various life domains.
In this context, he justifies that CA should be applied as a richer evaluative framework for assessing well-being on four main grounds:

1. **Diverse Needs for Resources:** Sen contends that individuals need different resources to achieve similar functionings. He illustrated that a person with dyslexia may require additional educational support. Thus, when evaluating such cases, assessments need to go beyond resource distribution to examine what people can actually achieve with those resources.
2. **Adaptive Preferences:** Sen also posits that people may adapt to adverse conditions and accordingly claim satisfaction even in undesirable circumstances. For example, a poorly equipped school claiming high performance. In such cases, evaluation must therefore include both subjective and objective conditions.

3. **Importance of Choice:** Sen reflects that the availability of valuable choices matters, even if they are not exercised. For instance, in the case of nutritional well-being, the experience of fasting voluntarily differs greatly from that of starving due to poverty, though both may appear nutritionally identical. In such circumstances, evaluation must consider both outcomes and the freedom to choose among them.
4. **Complexity of Human Life:** While happiness is an important measure of well-being, Sen contends that it should not be the sole criterion. He asserts that other aspects such as dignity, justice, and autonomy are equally significant. Although CA has its own strength, provision of flexibility and openness to multiple dimensions has also attracted criticism, providing avenues for scholars like Martha Nussbaum to propose structured lists of central capabilities.

Application of Capability Approach in Education

Following Sen's work, several scholars have applied the CA to education. Drèze and Sen (2013) and Hart (2009) used CA to examine the role of education in promoting human flourishing, asserting that education is central to the development of all human capabilities (Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 1999). Sen (1999) argues that education is a fundamental capability that enhances functionings and improves individuals' quality of life and well-being. Moreover, education fosters agency, enabling individuals to actively participate in the planning and conduct of their lives.

Agency, within the CA framework, is understood as a form of empowerment that enables individuals to pursue goals they have reason to value. For instance, equitable and quality education enhances individual capabilities, leading to informed decisions that positively influence personal, social, and professional lives.

Pham (2017) applied CA to evaluate Community-Driven Development (CDD) programmes by identifying capabilities relevant to poverty reduction, a core aim of CDD. This demonstrates the practical applicability of CA as an evaluative framework.

To sum up, CA has been employed as an evaluative tool to assess varied dimensions indicating its importance and usefulness as an evaluative framework.

Dimensions of Capability Approach

Sen contended that agency and well-being can be assessed through four categories of evaluative space which are classified into well-being freedom, well-being achievement, agency freedom, and agency achievement. These four categories form the evaluative space of human flourishing:

Table 1:

Sen's space of evaluation of human flourishing

	Freedom	**Achievement**
Well-being	Well-being freedom - the freedom to achieve ways of living one has reason to value (reflecting capability)	Well-being achievement -ways of living that one has reason to value (constituting functionings)
Agency	Agency freedom - freedom to pursue goals with influence beyond oneself and that one has reason to value	Agency achievement - achieving goals with influence beyond oneself and that one has reason to value

Adopted from Hart and Brando (2018), p. 293

Well-being freedom refers to the range of substantial freedoms or capabilities an individual has to achieve the things that contribute to their well-being (Sen, 1992, p. 57). In contrast, well-being achievement encompasses the actual beings and doings or functionings that a person realises, which constitute their well-being. For example, when a student has access to quality education, supportive teachers, and a safe learning environment, they possess the capability to pursue meaningful learning and develop into a well-informed individual (Sen, 1985). Successfully graduating from school as a result of these supportive conditions reflects a well-being achievement, representing the realisation of valued functionings that contributes to their overall well-being (Sen, 1992, p. 57).

But human flourishing extends beyond well-being alone. Sen (1992) includes both agency freedom and agency achievement as fundamental dimensions of human development. Agency freedom refers to the ability to act for one's valued goals and change the circumstance for oneself and one's community (Sen, 1992, p. 57). Agency achievement, on the other hand, is the actual realisation of those goals/objectives one has reason to value which may go beyond self-interest (Sen, 1992, pp. 56–57). For example, a teacher who chooses to campaign for gender equality, even when it does not directly benefit them, is exercising agency freedom. When that campaign leads to a tangible change in how girls are treated in schools, it represents an agency achievement.

According to Sen (1985, 1999, 2009), both freedom and personal values are crucial in evaluating quality of life. Evaluations must account not only for the outcomes but also for the processes by which those outcomes are achieved. Human flourishing, therefore, must encompass both well-being and agency, and reflect individual autonomy and diverse life goals. Hart and Brando (2018) argue that society must create conditions that allow individuals to freely choose and exercise their capabilities, provided they do not cause harm to others.

Summary

Therefore, a *capability set* refers to the bundle of *functionings*, the valuable "doings and beings" that a person can achieve to lead a good life. *Functionings* represent the realised outcomes or achievements that result when capabilities are put into action (Robeyns, 2005). Achieving these functionings requires *resources*, which are typically material or measurable inputs such as income. However, Sen (1992) emphasises that resources alone are insufficient to ensure that individuals attain their valued functionings.

Crucially, Robeyns (2017) points out that *conversion factors* play a central role in transforming resources into capabilities and capabilities into achieved functionings. These conversion factors encompass social, institutional, structural, and environmental preconditions that influence whether a person's internal capacities and potentials can be effectively exercised as real options and freedoms (Hart & Brando, 2018).

For example, in the context of a school children:

- **Personal conversion factors** refer to individual characteristics and competencies, such as the ability to read, write, and communicate effectively.

- **Social conversion factors** stem from structural elements like educational policies, cultural norms, and legal frameworks, for instance, the existence of inclusive support policies.

- **Environmental conversion factors** are physical aspects of the surroundings, such as access to a library, ICT facilities, and quality educational resources.

To genuinely enhance children's well-being and development, a balanced and holistic approach is required, one that not only addresses children's interests but also ensures the presence of enabling conditions that translate these interests into meaningful capabilities, competencies, and freedoms.

This study identifies 16 capability indicators and assesses school children's view regarding the availability, importance, and satisfaction of resources associated with these indicators. In addition, it examines school children's' perceptions of agency and well-being using the four core CA metrics:

1. Well-being Freedom
2. Well-being Achievement
3. Agency Freedom
4. Agency Achievement

The capability indicators were further categorised based on a situational analysis conducted in twenty-six secondary schools in Nepal, Bhutan, and Bangladesh. The study also explored how these capabilities are developed and supported within Bhutanese educational settings. A detailed discussion of these indicators follows in the next section.

Introduction to Capability Indicators

In this study, the GESI diagnostic tools build on this theoretical foundation to develop a multidimensional list of capabilities tailored to the Bhutanese school context. The framework places children's valued educational capabilities at the center, while each indicator also reflects how school children perceive how these indicators are developed and supported in schools. The indicators were selected in consultation with key stakeholders, policy makers in the Ministry of Education and Skills Development (MoESD), school teachers, and school children, who are directly impacted by GESI issues in their learning environments. By involving these stakeholders in defining what capabilities matter in schools, the framework ensures a shared understanding of each indicator, providing a common ground for data collection, analysis, reflection, and eventually, educational reforms. Importantly, by including school children in the process, the framework recognises them not just as beneficiaries but as active participants in shaping what they value and aspire to do and be.

Based on this, the following capability indicators were selected: Love, Care and Respect; Education; Nutritional Well-being; Aspiration; Physical Health; Body Integrity; Understand, interpret; Plan/Imagine and Think; Religion and Identity; Shelter and Environment; Mental Well-being; Social Relations; Autonomy; Freedom from economic/non-economic exploitation; Participation; Mobility; and GESI Curriculum. Each of these indicators is subsequently discussed below within the CA framework to emphasise their importance for understanding and promoting children's well-being and agency freedom and achievement.

Discussion on 16 Capability Indicators

1. Love, Care and Respect

Within the CA framework, emotional capabilities such as love, care, and respect are considered essential for children's well-being and crucial for fostering GESI. Domínguez-Serrano et al. (2018) highlight that these capabilities enable children to form healthy relationships, develop empathy, and participate inclusively in social environments. When children grow up in a nurturing atmosphere grounded in love and care, they are more likely to develop respect for themselves and others, fostering a strong sense of belonging. This contributes to creating a sense of belonging essential for inclusion. This idea aligns closely with Nussbaum's (2011) CA, which explicitly highlights *Emotions* and *Affiliations* as vital for addressing systemic gender and social inequalities.

A central part of developing these capabilities is modeling ways that are free from gender bias. Domínguez-Serrano et al. (2018) argues that when adults model this kind of unbiased care, they disrupt deeply held traditional gender norms by teaching children that caregiving and emotional support is not tied to gender. This opens space for both girls and boys to express emotions more freely, which not only strengthens their emotional resilience but also encourages mutual respect. Guo et al. (2020) provide empirical support for this, demonstrating that teacher support rooted in care and respect enhances resilience and helps adolescents better manage

negative emotions. This helps promote mental well-being, further validating the importance of emotional care in a child's development.

Respect for children's agency is another vital dimension. Domínguez-Serrano et al. (2018) emphasises the importance of acknowledging children's views, autonomy, and evolving capacities. When children are trusted to make decisions and take responsibility, it strengthens their participation and contributes to long-term gender equality and inclusion. This respect should extend to teaching shared responsibility in caregiving and household roles, which challenges stereotypical gendered divisions of labor and lays the groundwork for more equitable adult relationships. Furthermore, recognising and supporting each child's unique identity across gender, ability, and cultural norms promotes broader social inclusion.

These ideas resonate with Nussbaum's (2011) broader view that human dignity is not just about access to material resources; it also requires emotional and social support. Sacco (2024) reinforces this by highlighting the role of moral emotions, particularly compassion, as essential for shaping policies that address the needs of marginalised groups. Guo et al.'s (2020) findings on compassionate teacher-student relationships exemplify this principle, demonstrating tangible benefits for vulnerable adolescents' mental health.

Further, CA framework emphasises that well-being depends on both individual emotional capacities and collective agency. Comim et al. (2008) argue that respectful engagement with diverse voices is essential to solve structural inequalities. Cameron (2008) extends this by illustrating how integrating emotional expression in public dialogue empowers marginalised groups to meaningfully participate in decision making. This is further echoed by Nussbaum's (2011), who posits that human dignity depends on both material conditions and emotional-social support. By integrating these perspectives, the CA framework foregrounds love, care, and respect as core indicators of children's well-being and as essential foundations for GESI.

2. Education

Within CA, education is regarded as more than a means to economic productivity, but as central in expanding human freedom and dignity (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2003). Sen (1999) highlights education's role in enhancing agency, which is the capacity to act on one's values and engage in society. This is essential not only for personal growth but also participation. Nussbaum (2003) similarly emphasises the role of education in nurturing practical reason, social affiliation, and control over one's environment. This reflects education's multidimensional impact on cognitive, emotional, and social development of children (Nussbaum, 2003). Thus, education enables individuals not just to achieve specific function but to freely choose valued ways of living.

Therefore, education is regarded not only as a fundamental capability but also as a crucial indicator within the CA. It reflects individuals' real opportunities to develop agency and make meaningful life choices (Lanzi, 2007; Otto & Ziegler, 2006). Nussbaum (2003) stresses cultivating critical thinking and moral imagination, which are vital for respecting diversity and pursuing social justice. In addition to providing basic skills such as literacy and numeracy, education supports critical reflection, which is essential for meaningful participation in political,

social, and economic life (Walker 2005). Moreover, education is not limited to knowledge acquisition; it fosters autonomy and judgment, enabling individuals to effectively utilize their capabilities into functionings (Walker, 2005). Further, the educational environment also plays an important role in shaping values such as respect, aspirations, and empathy, which are vital for promoting inclusiveness (Walker, 2005).

Importantly, the education indicator emphasises preparing children not only for present choices but also for future freedoms, ensuring that educational experiences support long-term capability development (Walker, 2005). In this regard, Mohanasundaram and Chandrasekar (2014) cautioned against limiting education as a capability indicator to basic reading and writing skills. They argue that such a narrow focus is insufficient for sustainable development and poverty reduction. Instead, education must promote agency, empowerment, and sustainable human development, echoing sentiments by Sen (1992) who also critiques narrow resource-based views of education. This view is also supported by the UNESCO International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century (1996), as cited in Mohanasundaram and Chandrasekar (2014), which stresses the importance of enhancing “inner capabilities” to meet educational challenges. In fact, Mohanasundaram and Chandrasekar (2014) offers a practical pedagogical framework for cultivating capabilities through UNESCO’s four pillars of education: learning to know, to be, to live together, and to do. Each pillar supports the development of capabilities in distinct but interconnected ways. For instance, learning to know supports critical thinking and decision-making; learning to be nurtures self-esteem and identity; learning to live together fosters empathy and cooperation; and learning to equip learners with practical skills and a sense of control over their environment. This framework provides a holistic foundation for developing individual agency and aligning education with broader social and developmental goals. In this context, curricula, textbooks, and assessments play a critical role in advancing GESI in education. UNESCO (2020) emphasises that inclusive curricula must reflect the identities and experiences of marginalised groups, offering flexible pathways that support diverse learners. Further, textbooks can either challenge or reinforce stereotypes, making representation vital to how students perceive themselves and others. Assessments are often narrowly standardised, risk excluding learners with diverse needs. Together, these elements determine whether education is genuinely inclusive (UNESCO, 2020).

Thus, education serves as a measure of social justice. Thus, equitable access to educational resources directly affects individuals’ ability to function and achieve the lives they value (Walker, 2005). Participatory approaches to evaluating education, which involve school children, teachers, and communities, offer meaningful ways to assess whether educational practices are truly promoting capabilities (Walker 2005). Furthermore, by addressing the needs of the present while building the capabilities of future generations, education supports sustainable human development (Mohanasundaram & Chandrasekar, 2014). Overall, education as a capability indicator is not confined to academic achievement. It is about empowering individuals to lead lives they have reason to value by fostering their agency and ensuring fair access to opportunities (Walker, 2005).

3. Nutritional Well-being

Sen (1999) posits that nutritional well-being is not about having enough food or income; it's about whether people can actually achieve proper nourishment and live healthy lives. Building on this idea, Nussbaum (2003) highlights 'bodily health' and 'bodily integrity' in her list of Central Capabilities, emphasising that good nutrition is a basic necessity for humans to fully develop other capabilities such as education, work, and social affiliation. Building on this, Sharma and Sharma (2024) propose an integrated framework for understanding nutrition from a CA perspective. Their model incorporates personal, social, and structural conversion factors, such as education, sanitation, public policy, and cultural practices, that influence an individual's ability to transform resources into real nutritional outcomes. Unlike traditional models that focus solely on dietary deficiencies, this framework views nutrition through a border contact of empowerment and equity. Thus, nutritional well being is seen as both an outcome and an enabler of sustainable human development.

Additionally, Gombert et al. (2017) questions the notion of "food choice" in low-income contexts, arguing that the ability to choose is often constrained by financial pressures, social obligations, and limited access. Drawing from Sen's CA and extending it through the health capabilities perspective (Venkatapuram, 2011), they highlight that nutritional well-being is shaped by the interplay of agency and structural barriers. This approach shifts the discussion from individual responsibility to systemic factors that influence food-related decisions, such as time poverty, transport, and household dynamics.

Further, Burchi and De Muro (2012) argue for a CA-informed framework to assess food security. Their methodology involves three key analytical steps: examining nutritional capabilities, evaluating individuals' ability to be food secure, and understanding how deficits in other basic capabilities (such as health and education) may underlie food insecurity. This approach moves beyond entitlement and income-based models, and situates food security within a broader conception of human well-being and agency. By doing so, it identifies not only probable causes of malnutrition but also the structural injustices that restrict people's real choices in terms of nutritionals.

Recent work by Hirani and Richter (2017) extends the application of CA to population health and the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). They argue that addressing issues such as hunger and malnutrition requires moving beyond provisionist models toward frameworks that emphasise individual capabilities, agency, and conversion factors. Their analysis supports the notion that improving nutrition involves not just food availability, but enabling individuals and communities to achieve nutritional well-being through equitable access, autonomy, and supportive environments. This further aligns CA with multi-sectoral efforts in global health and sustainable development.

Together, these contributions affirm that nutrition is inseparable from the larger aims of human development and social justice. The approach foregrounds individuals' real freedoms to achieve nutritional well-being, emphasising the importance of addressing both personal agency and systemic inequalities.

4. Aspiration

Aspiration plays a multifaceted and central role within CA, influencing both individual development and broader social progress. Nussbaum (2016) emphasises that aspiration functions in a dual capacity: it motivates individuals to pursue a variety of personal and social goals, while also serving as a normative ideal that societies should aim to achieve. Aspiration is thus positioned not only as a personal drive but also as a collective standard for human development and flourishing. Complementing this view, Shneyder et al. (2021) explore the level of aspiration as a key indicator of an individual's desire for financial well-being. Their empirical study reveals a "split" nature of aspiration: while people express clear desires for financial success and well-being, they often set relatively low concrete goals and show reluctance to disrupt their established lifestyles or undergo personal change to reach higher aspirations. This complexity illustrates that aspiration is shaped by a combination of motivational, personal, and socio-cultural factors, reflecting broader social influences on individual goals.

Building on these insights, Ballet et al. (2018) propose an integrated framework linking capabilities, identity, aspirations, and ecosystem services. They introduce the concept of a "personal identity conversion factor," which highlights how personal identity affects the transformation of available resources into capabilities and shapes the formation of aspirations. This approach broadens the understanding of aspiration by situating it within cultural and ecological contexts, emphasising that aspirations are not only personal but also deeply embedded in social and environmental systems. Such integration shows how aspirations can have both positive and negative implications for sustainable development.

Further advancing this understanding, Hart (2016) explains how aspirations develop and transform within the CA framework. He illustrates that aspirations are linked to capabilities and functionings, highlighting the importance of feasibility judgments including how individuals assess which aspirations are achievable within their personal and social contexts. Hart's work clarifies that the process of turning aspirations into capabilities, and subsequently into realised achievements or functionings, is dynamic and involves both individual effort and collective influences. Developing aspirations is thus a critical, ongoing process for human flourishing.

Similarly, Conradie (2013) examines how deliberate efforts to realize aspirations can expand capabilities, focusing on economically marginalised women in South Africa. Her study supports Appadurai's idea that fostering aspirations can unlock development by expanding people's capabilities. Conradie finds that supporting individuals to voice and pursue their aspirations, alongside providing access to resources, enhances their capabilities. However, she also notes that structural constraints, such as systemic barriers to social mobility, limit the full realisation of these aspirations. This underscores the complex relationship between individual agency and external factors within CA.

5. Physical Health

CA offers a meaningful way of understanding physical health by looking beyond health outcomes or access to resources. Rather, it focuses on whether people have the opportunity to

live a life that they value (Tengland, 2019). This includes not only being in good health but also being free to participate in activities that promote their overall well-being (Till et al., 2021). Sen distinguishes between functionings, which refers to what people actually accomplish, and capabilities, which refer to the actual possibilities with which they can accomplish those things (as cited in Wells, n.d.). In this sense, CA focuses on what individuals are truly able to be and do when it comes to their health.
While the CA places greater emphasis on what people are actually able to do and be rather than on their resources, it also recognises that some basic needs must be met first. Without basic resources such as income, access to healthcare, nutritious food, and safe housing, people struggle to develop or maintain their health capabilities (Till et al., 2021). These limitations make it much more difficult for individuals to take care of their health or to live the life they value.

CA highlights the importance of agency, which is the ability of the individual to make choices and act on them (Chiappero Martinetti et al.,2020). In the area of health, this means supporting people not only to achieve good health but also to have the freedom to choose healthy lifestyles. Rather than focusing only on outcomes, CA sees well-being as being both health and the ability to make real choices about the kind of healthy life they want to lead (Till et al., 2021).
People's capabilities to live a healthy life are not only about the resources they have but also many other factors that influence how those resources can be transformed into real opportunities.

Individual Factors: Personal circumstances such as disability, physical health, motivation, or how well a person understands health information can all influence their ability to use the health resources at their disposal effectively (Broderick, 2018; Tengland, 2019; Till et al., 2021). For example, someone with low health literacy may have access to information about health care but lack the capability to understand and act upon it (Broderick, 2018). Similarly, physical impairments may limit access to facilities for physical activity, thereby limiting this essential health capability (Till et al., 2021).

Social Factors: Health capabilities are shaped not only by individual circumstances but also by the social environment. Social norms, traditional gender roles, and power imbalances may prevent certain people from participating in activities that support their health (Broderick, 2018; Chiappero-Martinetti et al., 2021; Till et al., 2021; Wells, n.d.). For example, in some communities, cultural expectations may prevent women from participating in certain types of exercise, which limits their physical activity capabilities (Chiappero Martinetti et al., 2020).

Environmental Factors: The physical environment in which people live plays a major role in their health. Things such as clean air and water, good infrastructure, and safe public spaces (Broderick, 2018; Till et al., 2021.) have a direct impact on health capabilities. For example, when urban areas lack accessible parks and green spaces, it becomes harder for people to engage in outdoor activities, which are essential for maintaining both physical and mental health (Till et al., 2021).

Institutional Factors: Public policies and legal systems can either support or inhibit people's capabilities to care for their health. Inaccessible transport systems or exclusionary health programmes can limit opportunities for people with disabilities or those living in poverty to access healthcare and participate in health-promoting activities (Chiappero Martinetti et al., 2020).

Resources Access: Although the CA focuses on real opportunities, not just resources, it still recognises the importance of certain basic needs such as income, quality healthcare, and safe housing. Without these, it's very hard for anyone to build or maintain good health (Chiappero Martinetti et al., 2020). The CA also highlights the "double handicap" faced by People with disabilities, who often experience both financial resources and system barriers in making available resources for good health outcomes (Chiappero Martinetti et al., 2020).

The CA provides a valuable way to think about health. It turns attention away from solely focusing on outcomes to the opportunities people have in real life to live in ways that promote their health and well-being. At the same time, putting this approach into practice especially in research, policy, and health programmes remains a challenge and requires further refinement to inform policy and practice effectively.

6. Bodily Integrity

Bodily integrity is one of the ten central human capabilities identified by Martha Nussbaum (2000) as essential for a dignified and prosperous life. This includes freedom to move around safely, protection from violence such as sexual assault, domestic abuse and child abuse, and the ability to make personal choices about sexuality and reproduction. This capability is not limited to physical security but also the ability to move freely, make independent decisions, and maintain control over one's own body (Nussbaum, 2000; Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy [IEP], n.d.).

Within the CA, bodily integrity is recognised as both a fundamental and an enabling capability. When bodily integrity is violated or threatened, it affects not only physical health and safety but also other important capabilities such as reasoning, emotional well-being, education, and participation in social life (Nussbaum, 2000). For example, people who experience violence or threats of violence often become focused on survival, which drains their mental and emotional resources and limits their ability to pursue education or develop meaningful relationships. This is especially important for children whose developing sense of self and self-reliance make them more prone to breakdowns.

Mackenzie et al. (2023) further define capability corrosion as a state in which children's capabilities are damaged and emphasise that when this happens, children may lose the opportunity to develop strong relationships with peers, teachers, and other support networks. Lack of safety, respect, and social connection can have a profound effect on other related capabilities, including bodily health, emotions, imagination and thinking, and practical reasoning (Nussbaum, 2006, as cited in Mackenzie et al., 2023).

Graf and Schweiger (2017) stress that childhood is a particularly vulnerable period of life, in which bodily integrity needs to be carefully protected. Children's autonomy is still developing, and their ability to exercise control over their bodies varies greatly. During this stage, violations of bodily integrity, whether through abuse, neglect, or lack of protection, can have long-lasting effects on the children's sense of safety, independence and personal development.

CA argues that the protection of bodily integrity goes beyond preventing harm; it also creates real opportunities for people to live in safety, move around freely and exercise their personal agency. This is particularly important for children, who have the right to feel safe and secure under international conventions such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989), particularly Articles 6, 19, and 32, which emphasise the rights of the child to life, protection from violence, and freedom from exploitation.

As indicated by Smith et al. (2023), ensuring bodily integrity is a necessary step in enabling people to live lives that they value. Without it, the capacity to participate fully in society and to develop other key capabilities is severely limited.

7. Understand, Interpret, Plan/Imagine and Think

CA focuses on the real freedom of people to live the lives they value. Although originally intended for adults, CA is increasingly used to recognise children as active individuals who can shape their own well-being (Biggeri et al., 2011).

Recent studies show that children, especially school-age children can understand and express themselves when given the right support. Hart and Brando (2018) explain that as children grow and develop greater communication skills, they are more capable of engaging with the ideas behind CA. In a supportive environment, children can reflect on what makes them feel good, including school, friendships, and safety (Hart & Brando, 2018; Kellock, 2020). Education plays a key role in helping children develop this understanding. In CA perspective, schooling should go beyond academics to focus on building children's confidence, sense of agency, and ability to participate meaningfully in decisions that affect them (Otto & Ziegler, 2006). Hart and Brando (2018) stress that teachers can support children's development by creating a learning environment that values the voices of children and encourages their autonomy.

One important way to support children's capabilities is through scaffolding, providing the right amount of help while still allowing them to make their own choices. This idea is consistent with Vygotsky's theory of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD theory, which suggests that children learn best when supported by more experienced individuals (Hart, 2018). Daly (2020) adds that the ability of children to understand and make decisions is highly dependent on how adults interact with them, by listening openly, offering guidance without pressure, and respecting their opinions. To really include children in decision-making, adults need to be willing to listen to their voices and offer support without taking control.

However, assessing children's ability to plan and make decisions remains a challenge. Daly (2020) notes that such assessments often rely on informal assessment rather than structured

methods. However, creating a safe space where children feel free to speak and receive unbiased support can help them develop confidence, reflect on their interests and contribute to shaping their own lives.

The introduction of CA in schools reminds us of the importance of supporting children's growing capacity to understand, interpret, and plan for their own well-being. With the right teaching practices and school environments that respect their agency, education can play a powerful role in broadening their capabilities and supporting their full development (Hart & Brando, 2018; Peleg, 2013).

Imagine and Think

The capacity to imagine and think critically is essential for children's development and future agency. Within CA, imagination is a vital freedom: the ability to envision alternatives, foster empathy, and generate new ideas (Sen, 1999; Peleg, 2013; Nussbaum, 2003). Bhutan's education policies reflect this, promoting holistic pedagogy that values creativity and critical thinking (MoESD, 2024; NCWC, 2020).

Children express imagination through storytelling, artistic play, and exploratory dialogue. Esteban (2022) affirms that inclusive educational environments expand children's agency by valuing narrative exploration and creative expression. This aligns with UNESCO (2020), which calls for inclusive curricula that accommodate diverse cognitive styles, particularly for children from marginalised backgrounds. Access to enabling resources such as libraries and ICT facilities plays a crucial role in this process by supporting open-ended learning and imaginative thinking.

The National Education Policy (MoE, 2022 draft) stresses the importance of "inquiry-based and experiential learning" and proposes strengthening school libraries and digital infrastructure to stimulate imagination and critical thinking. Similarly, the Bhutan Education Blueprint 2014–2024 (MoE, 2014) advocates for ICT-integrated classrooms and access to reading spaces as essential conditions for nurturing "21st-century learners" who can think creatively and solve complex problems.

Environmental engagement also enhances imaginative capacities. Zaremba et al. (2024) show that activities like nature play stimulate reflection on sustainability, while Kellock (2020) highlights how imaginative inquiry builds children's capacity to understand complex social issues. Yet, despite its developmental importance, imagination is often constrained. Gillett-Swan and Sargeant (2019) argue that adult-centric educational cultures, high-stakes testing, and rigid curricula marginalize children's original ideas, particularly for those from disadvantaged or culturally diverse communities (Broderick, 2018).

Empowering imagination also supports mental well-being. Imaginative play and storytelling allow children to process emotions, build resilience, and rehearse alternative futures (Liu et al., 2023; Thomas et al., 2021). Cognitive flexibility, empathy, and language development are key components of social inclusion, nurtured when children are free to imagine (Löfstedt et al., 2023; Knight & McNaught, 2011).

Teachers play a pivotal role in enabling imagination. Sharma et al. (2012) highlight that educators with high efficacy in inclusive practices are more likely to encourage creativity in diverse learners. For this to be realised systemically, schools must embed imaginative engagement within policies and practices that promote gender equity and social inclusion. Aikman and Unterhalter (2007) stress the need to address gender and cultural barriers that limit girls' and marginalised children's access to creative learning opportunities.

The right to think, imagine, and create must be actively protected and cultivated. As Peleg (2013) asserts, imagination is not just an individual trait but a social capability that requires nurturing contexts. Equipping schools with diverse resources such as inclusive libraries and accessible digital tools enables children to explore identities, ideas, and futures (Chiappero-Martinetti et al., 2021). When adults encourage children to imagine themselves, children also cultivate hope and agency, developing the freedom to shape their world (Vain, 2025).

8. Religion and Identity

A child's religious or spiritual identity plays an important role in their overall development and well-being. CA values the freedom to be and do what matters most to a person. This includes the freedom to explore, choose, and express religious beliefs (Nussbaum, 2011). Article 14 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) reinforces this by reaffirming the right of every child to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. These freedoms increase as children get older and more mature, helping them to develop their own beliefs according to their abilities (Daly, 2020; UNCRC, 1989).

Nussbaum's (2011) list of central capabilities helps us understand how religion and identity matter in the lives of children. For example, the capability of senses, imagination, and thought encourages children to explore religious ideas and traditions. Practical reasons enable them to reflect on their values and make personal decisions. The capability of connecting emphasises the importance of relationships, belonging, and community.

Research shows that as children grow, they become more capable of forming and expressing their own beliefs. Hart and Brando (2018) found that children can explain what is important to them, including their spirituality and morality. Rather than simply adopting the beliefs of their parents, many children develop their own religious identities based on personal experiences and what they learn from different sources.

How children develop religious identities depends on what the CA calls "conversion factors" – things that affect how resources and opportunities translate into meaningful outcomes (Sen, 1999). This includes influences from family, school environment, and wider social environment.

Schools and teachers have a key role to play in helping children explore and understand their identity. Hart and Brando (2018) emphasise the importance of a school environment that fosters children's freedom, confidence, and growth in children. Education guided by CA should aim to

do more than improve academic performance. It should also help children to become thoughtful, self-reliant, and active members of society (Otto & Ziegler, 2006).

Scaffolding is a useful teaching approach as it provides guidance to children while still giving them space to develop their own ideas and beliefs. Creating a classroom environment in which different religious views are discussed in a safe and respectful way will help children to think more openly, reflect deeply, and respect one another.

It can be difficult to assess how children develop in terms of religion and identity. As explained by Daly (2020), these assessments are often informal and lack clear methods. But if children are given time, support, and opportunities to express themselves, they may grow up understanding themselves and making meaningful choices.

Although religion is increasingly studied in global development, there is still limited research on how children experience religion and identity from a CA perspective (Chiappero-Martinetti et al., 2021). Most existing studies focus on religion as one aspect of well-being or on the contributions of religious institutions to development. More research is needed into how children themselves perceive and develop their religious identity. Religion and identity are more than just personal traits, they are also vital parts of a child's well-being and freedom. With the right support from families and schools, children can explore and express their beliefs in a meaningful way. CA helps to highlight the importance of treating children as capable individuals whose personal and spiritual development should be respected and supported.

9. Shelter and Environment

A safe, clean, and stable environment is fundamental to children's ability to thrive and live with dignity. CA views shelter as more than a physical need. It is a key freedom that supports growth, play, health, and security (Peleg, 2013; Nussbaum, 2003; Broderick, 2018). Sen (1999) highlights that development means expanding people's freedoms. This includes the freedom to access helpful educational settings. In schools, this means having enough space, well-lit classrooms, and enough desks and benches. These features help all children learn in a way that promotes comfort and dignity (MoE, 2014; MoE, 2022).

Bhutanese schools are increasingly recognising that the physical learning environment significantly influences students' emotional and cognitive well-being. Dorji (2023) highlights that poorly maintained classrooms, crowded spaces, and limited infrastructure impede academic engagement and contribute to increased stress, discomfort, and social exclusion. Further, Aikman and Unterhalter (2007) supports this by positing that gender equality in schools is not just about what's taught in the classroom, but also in terms of how children interact during lunch breaks, who gets to speak up in assemblies, or how boys and girls play together. Further, these informal spaces often reflect the same gender norms and power imbalances found in the wider world (Aikman & Unterhalter, 2007).

In contrast, when school infrastructure is safe, clean, and well-designed, children report feeling more secure, supported, and valued which are key psychological conditions for learning and development (MoESD, 2024).

UNICEF (2021) reports that over one-third of the world's children live in poor housing or lack clean water and sanitation. This compromises their development in a significant way. When schools also have issues like overcrowded classrooms, broken furniture, or limited learning spaces, children's well-being suffers. The UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report (2020) states that learning environments must include all individuals, provide access to everyone, and offer equitable resources. This ensures that every child can participate in education, regardless of gender, ability, or background.

Environmental inequality is particularly harmful to children in marginalised or displaced communities. Bhutan's National Gender Equality Policy emphasises the necessity of infrastructure that is sensitive to gender and friendly to children. This aims to protect and empower vulnerable groups (NCWC, 2020). Aikman and Unterhalter (2007) point out that gendered expectations combined with poor infrastructure, such as unsafe classrooms, worsen educational exclusion. In these cases, shelter matters more than walls and roofs. It affects how children feel safe, connected, and engaged in learning. Bhutanese schools are now adding green spaces, mindfulness zones, and flexible classroom designs to meet children's emotional and environmental needs (Dorji, 2023; MoESD, 2024). When school shelters are unstable, overcrowded, or inadequately furnished, children's capacities for emotional regulation and academic engagement diminish. Thomas et al. (2021) found that even brief exposure to natural spaces improved emotional well-being in shelter contexts, highlighting how the environment shapes inner life. Similarly, Zaremba et al. (2024) report that children who engage in sustainable practices within school spaces build a sense of empathy and responsibility, thus strengthening both their agency freedom and achievement.

Environmental capability also includes the opportunity to establish a significant connection with nature and to access clean, secure, and inclusive physical spaces for learning. Child-friendly school layouts, sufficient classrooms, and participation in environmental decisions are the essential components of this capability. However, these considerations are often overlooked in educational policy and planning (MoE, 2022). Gillett-Swan and Sargeant (2019) caution that adults often underestimate the depth of children's perceptions and responses to environmental risks and discomfort.

Supporting this capability requires recognising the children's voices and lived experiences. Sharma et al. (2012) highlight that educators' capacity to implement inclusive practices is influenced not only by attitudes and training but also by the enabling conditions of the learning environment, including infrastructure. In Bhutan, Dorji (2023) emphasises that educators are increasingly encouraged to consider classroom space and layout as key components of emotional safety and well-being (MoESD, 2024).

Hence, improving shelter conditions is not only a material investment but also a strategic move toward achieving equity and inclusive education. Ultimately, ensuring that every child has access to a clean, safe, and well-resourced school environment is more than a logistical challenge; it represents a matter of justice and freedom (Sen, 1999; MoE, 2014). When the school environment supports comfort, safety, and participation, children gain more than survival; they gain space to flourish, belong, and shape their futures (Chiappero-Martinetti et al., 2021; Dorji. 2023; MoESD, 2024).

10. Mental Well-being

Mental well-being is a critical freedom that reflects a child's ability to experience security, connection, and emotional resilience. Within CA, mental well-being is not simply the absence of psychological distress but the real freedom to engage in life with confidence, dignity, and hope, even amidst adversity (Peleg, 2013; Nussbaum, 2003; Sen, 1999). In the Bhutanese context, educational reforms are recognising this dimension with greater frequency, positioning mental well-being as central to holistic child development and GNH (Dorji, 2023; MoESD, 2024). Bhutan's National Education Policy (NEP) now integrates social-emotional learning, mindfulness, and well-being literacy, with the aim of fostering compassion, resilience, and belonging from early grades (Dorji, 2023; MoESD, 2024).

A key contributor to this capability in school settings is the presence of effective grievance mechanisms: confidential, accessible systems that allow children to express their concerns, report harm, and seek support without fear of retaliation or stigma. Sen (1999) argues that development entails the expansion of substantive freedoms, which include the ability to be heard and to seek redress in one's everyday environment. In schools, this means institutionalising children's right to voice grievances related to bullying, discrimination, or exclusion, and addressing these concerns through responsive, inclusive mechanisms. Such systems reinforce both well-being achievement (actual experience of emotional safety) and agency freedom (the ability to choose to seek help and address one's needs). Bhutanese educators have begun to recognise the necessity of creating emotionally safe and dialogue-based classroom environments to support these capabilities (Dorji, 2023; MoESD, 2024).

UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Report (2020) emphasises that inclusive education must go beyond physical access; it must also ensure that children feel safe, valued, and heard in their learning environments. Grievance systems designed with these principles at their core help dismantle barriers linked to gender, ability, class, or ethnicity, and thus promote both equity and mental well-being.

Aikman and Unterhalter (2007) argue that effective educational reform must account for power imbalances, particularly those that silence the voices of girls, children with disabilities, and other marginalised learners. The absence of safe and anonymous channels to report grievances reinforces cycles of exclusion and emotional distress. When children lack such options, they undermine their capacity for self-expression and self-protection, which weakens their agency in the mental health domain.

Teacher efficacy plays a pivotal role. Sharma et al. (2012) emphasise that for inclusive practices to be effective, teachers must be both willing and equipped to respond to the emotional and behavioral concerns students raise, whether through formal grievance procedures or everyday classroom interactions. A grievance mechanism is only meaningful if it is embedded within a relational culture where teachers are trained to recognise, validate, and address children's emotional needs. In Bhutan, capacity-building programmes for educators increasingly integrate well-being awareness, mental health literacy, and reflective teaching practices to equip teachers with these relational capabilities (Dorji, 2023; MoE, 2022; MoESD, 2024).

Children's mental well-being is shaped by the presence of caring relationships, opportunities for emotional expression, and trusted systems of redress. Establishing robust grievance mechanisms within schools not only supports prevention and early intervention but also fosters a climate of trust, fairness, and shared responsibilities. Ultimately, promoting this capability requires structural action and cultural transformation, where children are recognised as active participants with rights and voices that matter (Chiappero-Martinetti et al., 2021; UNESCO, 2020; MoESD, 2024).

11. Social Relations

Social relationships are essential for children's development and identity. From a capability perspective, they are not merely contextual supports, but are fundamental freedoms that shape how children participate in, contribute to, and feel valued within society (Sen, 1999; Peleg, 2013; Nussbaum, 2003). Social relations provide emotional grounding, foster empathy, and build trust (Knight & McNaught, 2011).

The National Gender Equality Policy (NCWC, 2020) recognises that relational safety is central to children's inclusion and development. However, children from marginalised backgrounds, including those with disabilities, in poverty, or from stigmatised communities, often experience relational exclusion. UNICEF (2024) reports that children facing rejection or neglect are significantly more vulnerable to mental health challenges and risky behaviors.

Friendship serves as a strong protective factor. Löfstedt et al. (2023) found that consistent peer support gives children a sense of belonging and purpose, especially during adolescence. Despite this, adult attitudes may undervalue the emotional significance of peer relationships. Gillett-Swan and Sargeant (2019) caution that misjudging children's social needs can limit their opportunities for authentic connection and social identity.

The digital world has reshaped relational dynamics. Liu et al. (2023) show that adolescents who lack supportive offline relationships may turn to digital platforms for emotional validation, which can sometimes lead to unhealthy dependencies. In contrast, secure offline social networks act as buffers, promoting mental well-being and identity formation.

UNESCO (2020) underscores that inclusive school environments must actively foster peer relationships and teacher-student trust, especially for students facing exclusion. Bhutan's NEP (MoE, 2022 draft) affirms the importance of nurturing student well-being through "whole-school approaches" that prioritise collaboration among students, teachers, and families. It highlights co-curricular activities and parent engagement as key strategies for enhancing inclusion and social integration.

Similarly, the Bhutan Education Blueprint 2014–2024 (MoE, 2014) outlines strategic reforms aimed at strengthening student support systems, including the institutionalisation of Parent-Teacher Meetings (PTA) and Child and Youth Clubs. These platforms are intended to promote child participation, peer connection, and community involvement which are critical ingredients in building relational capability. When schools actively support such practices, they create environments where children can experience trust, inclusion, and belonging.

Inclusive teaching practices are also essential. Sharma et al. (2012) demonstrate that teachers' confidence in inclusive approaches enhances student participation, enabling social interaction among diverse learners. These pedagogical capabilities help reduce social isolation and promote mutual respect.

Social relationships are not background conditions; they are capabilities in themselves, shaping both present well-being and future agency (Broderick, 2018; Chiappero-Martinetti et al., 2021). Aikman and Unterhalter (2007) stress that gender-sensitive education must address unequal relational dynamics, recognizing that girls and children with disabilities may have fewer opportunities to engage in valued social spaces. Thus, fostering inclusive, meaningful social relations within schools through mechanisms such as Child Clubs and active parental engagement is central to achieving well-being and agency for all children.

12. Autonomy

Autonomy is the capability to make meaningful decisions and take action in shaping one's life. From a capability perspective, autonomy is central to both agency and dignity (Sen, 1999; Peleg, 2013; Broderick, 2018). For children, autonomy goes beyond mere independence; it involves environments that nurture voice, choice, and the ability to take responsibility at an early age.

However, adult-centric systems often prioritise control over empowerment, unintentionally compromising children's autonomy. Gillett-Swan and Sargeant (2019) argue that adults frequently underestimate children's decision-making competence, particularly in structured school and family settings. Bhutan's NEP (MoE, 2022 draft) underscores the importance of learner-centered approaches that provide opportunities for students to "exercise voice and make informed decisions in learning and personal growth." Similarly, the Bhutan Education Blueprint 2014–2024 (MoE, 2014) commits to "nurturing student agency". It calls for a shift from rote instruction to participatory, inquiry-based learning to foster decision-making and problem-solving skills.

Free time is a critical dimension of autonomy that is frequently undervalued in formal educational systems. The UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report [GEMR] (2020) warns that over-scheduled curricula and exam-focused learning often limit students' opportunities for unstructured, self-directed time, particularly impacting those already facing systemic barriers. When learners are not given time to explore their interests or rest meaningfully, agency and freedom are restricted.

Support for autonomy must begin with practices that are inclusive and suitable for developmental stages. Sharma et al. (2012) assert that teachers' confidence and competence in inclusive education are essential for creating environments that respect student choice and promote autonomy. In such environments, students can use their free time as a space for growth, self-expression, and social learning especially when they are encouraged to use it meaningfully.

Gender and cultural norms also influence children's access to free time. Aikman and Unterhalter (2007) note that girls often face restrictions due to domestic roles and gendered expectations,

which limit their leisure and learning autonomy. Schools committed to gender equality must recognize and address these structural limitations to enable full participation.

Autonomy has strong links to emotional and psychological well-being. When children feel trusted and supported in their choices, their resilience and self-esteem improve (Esteban, 2022; Knight & McNaught, 2011). Conversely, overprotection or rigid control fosters dependency and disengagement. The challenge is not to remove guidance, but to gradually increase children's participation in decisions affecting them.

Cultural contexts and education policies must actively support children's rights to autonomy. As Sen (1999) reminds us, development must be seen as expanding real freedoms. Thus, autonomy, including access to meaningful free time, is not a luxury but a fundamental educational and human right. Bhutan's education policy vision aligns with this view, recognising autonomy not only as a pedagogical ideal but also as a path toward fostering responsible, resilient, and self-directed learners (MoE, 2022; MoE, 2014).

13. Freedom from economic/non-economic exploitation

Within CA, freedom from economic and non-economic exploitation is a fundamental aspect of an individual's substantive freedom. The concept of capability indicators, especially regarding freedom from exploitation, is crucial for understanding human welfare and agency, as CA emphasises measuring individual freedoms and the ability to achieve valuable functions that exploitation can hinder. Anand et al. (2009) emphasise that economic exploitation occurs when individuals lack real capabilities to make choices that improve their well-being, thereby limiting their freedom to pursue valued life outcomes. This approach broadens welfare beyond material or economic measures to include a wide range of opportunities and freedoms individuals enjoy, recognising that freedom from exploitation includes both economic deprivation and non-economic constraints such as social discrimination, political marginalisation, and cultural exclusion, all of which restrict a person's ability to live a fulfilling life.

Economic Exploitation

Economic exploitation can be assessed through capability indicators reflecting access to resources and opportunities. Studies show that capability is inversely related to resources, indicating that those with fewer resources often experience greater economic constraints (Hasan, 2009). Importantly, traditional income inequality measures may understate disparities in actual freedoms because capability deprivation encompasses more than income. It includes health, education, and social inclusion (Hasan, 2009). Furthermore, Anand et al. (2007) identify groups with low all-round capabilities, characterised by poor health and low income, who are particularly vulnerable to exploitation due to limited real freedoms to improve their circumstances. These intertwined deprivations highlight how multidimensional capability indicators provide a more comprehensive understanding of economic exploitation beyond income alone.

Non-Economic Exploitation

Non-economic exploitation involves social and political dimensions such as agency freedom, empowerment, and social inclusion. Research shows that individuals with high resource access

may still face social exclusion, revealing the complexity of empowerment and the distinction between having resources and achieving substantive freedoms (Tinonin, 2013). Agency freedom, defined as empowered autonomous choice, is a critical capability indicator that exposes disparities invisible through resource measures alone (Tinonin, 2013). Systemic inequalities in education, health, and political participation further act as barriers to substantive freedom, perpetuating non-economic exploitation and marginalisation (Author, Year). This expanded understanding stresses the importance of multidimensional capability indicators in diagnosing and addressing both economic and non-economic exploitation.

Building on this framework, Hasan (2009) highlights positive freedom, not merely the absence of constraints but the genuine ability to pursue opportunities and achieve well-being. His findings demonstrate that possessing resources does not guarantee freedom from exploitation, as barriers may prevent conversion of resources into valuable capabilities and functionings. Hasan also identifies significant disparities in capabilities and freedoms, exacerbating vulnerability to exploitation. Tinonin's (2013) empirical study in rural Uttar Pradesh reveals a critical disjunction within the CA: access to resources does not necessarily translate into empowerment or agency, and greater autonomy may paradoxically increase social exclusion in certain socio-cultural contexts.

14. Participation

Participation is more than inclusion; it is a vital expression of children's agency and dignity. Through the lens of CA, participation is a fundamental freedom that enables children to shape their environments and influence decisions that affect their lives (Sen, 1999; Peleg, 2013; Nussbaum, 2003). In Bhutan, education policies increasingly recognize children as contributors to both community and national development (MoESD, 2024; NCWC, 2020).

Participation fosters self-worth, problem-solving, and a sense of belonging. Esteban (2022) highlights how inclusive school practices that promote "progressive autonomy" support both academic growth and active citizenship. However, opportunities for meaningful participation are often restricted by adultist assumptions that underestimate children's capacities (Gillett-Swan & Sargeant, 2019). These barriers are particularly pronounced for marginalised children, who may be excluded from decision-making in both classroom and extracurricular activities.

Extra-curricular activities offer critical platforms for participation that extend beyond academic achievement. According to UNESCO (2020), such activities provide safe spaces for creative expression, peer engagement, and leadership development, especially important for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Bhutan's NEP (MoE, 2022 draft) emphasises the integration of co-curricular and extra-curricular learning as central to nurturing "GNH-based citizenship" and inclusive participation. It explicitly promotes student involvement in school clubs, sports, and cultural events as a means to develop leadership, creativity, and collaboration.

The Bhutan Education Blueprint 2014–2024 (MoE, 2014) further supports this by identifying student voice and participation as key drivers of education transformation. It recommends structured platforms such as student forums, peer mentoring, and activity-based learning clubs to empower learners in decision-making and civic engagement. However, these opportunities

are often unevenly distributed. Children with disabilities, from low-income families, or from rural areas may lack the resources or encouragement to participate meaningfully (Broderick, 2018).

Empowering participation requires teachers who are confident in inclusive methods. Sharma et al. (2012) show that teachers' efficacy in inclusive practices significantly shapes the degree to which children are encouraged and supported to participate fully in both academic and extracurricular activities. This underscores the importance of capacity building in schools, particularly around gender, ability, and social inclusion.

Digital participation is an emerging domain. While it opens new avenues for youth voice, it also risks reinforcing digital exclusion. UNICEF (2024) and Kellock (2020) caution that children from disadvantaged communities may lack access or protection in online spaces, deepening their marginalisation.

Policy and practice must go beyond symbolic gestures. As Vain (2025) argues, participation should be embedded in school governance, curriculum planning, and everyday interactions. Genuine inclusion demands that adults listen respectfully, co-create initiatives with students, and recognise children's evolving capacities (Stoecklin, 2013).

Aikman and Unterhalter (2007) emphasise that gender-equitable education must actively dismantle participation barriers, particularly for girls and children facing intersecting disadvantages. Recognising participation as both a right and a capability is crucial for social justice and equity.

Participation is not merely instrumental; it is developmental. Zaremba et al. (2024) found that student participation in school decisions fosters emotional resilience, environmental stewardship, and collective responsibility. Empowering children through equitable and accessible participation aligns with Bhutan's Gross National Happiness values and advances all four well-being dimensions within CA (Chiappero-Martinetti et al., 2021; Knight & McNaught, 2011).

15. Mobility

CA has attracted attention in the field of transport research, especially in discussions about equity and access. Instead of focusing only on whether people have access to transport or resources, CA highlights the freedom of people to achieve well-being which is measured in terms of capabilities and function (Vecchio & Martens, 2021). For example, the ability to visit a friend is a capability, whereas the actual act of visiting is a function.

Capabilities provide people with the freedom to achieve what they value, whereas resources such as transport services and infrastructure are merely tools that may or may not lead to capabilities or functionings (Chiappero-Martinetti et al., 2021; Mateus et al., 2020). Whether these tools lead to opportunities depends on several conversion factors, including:

- Personal factors: age, disability, confidence, income.
- Social factors: cultural expectations, safety concerns, institutional systems.
- Environmental factors: infrastructure quality, climate, and spatial layout (Wells, 2020; Humberto et al., 2020; Orellana et al., 2024).

These factors shape the freedom of movement of individuals and determine their actual access to places and activities, referring to them as their "capability set" (Vecchio & Martens, 2021).

In applying CA to transport, three main perspectives have emerged:

1. Mobility as a capability sees movement itself as valuable and focuses on whether people can travel. However, some scholars argue that this may overlook the fact that mobility leads to meaningful outcomes. (Menon, 2021; Vecchio & Martens, 2021).
2. The most widely supported view is that of accessibility as a capability. Here, the focus is on whether people are free to participate in activities outside the home. This view underlines the importance of mobility for the achievement of valuable functions such as working, learning, or socialising (Vecchio & Martens, 2021).
3. Transport policy as a conversion factor places the transport systems at the forefront of broader capabilities such as access to education and healthcare. While this is a useful perspective, some researchers caution against overemphasising this view and argue that focusing on accessibility provides more clear policy guidance (Vecchio & Martens, 2021).

In short, CA is changing the way we think about equity in transport by focusing on what people can actually do and how they can access it, rather than just whether they can move around. Seeing accessibility as a key capability offers a clearer, more people-centred way of planning transport systems.

16. Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Curriculum

Promoting gender equality and social inclusion in education is crucial for the success of all students. Education has the power to break barriers, and CA provides a useful framework for understanding how to do this. Instead of simply ensuring that everyone has equal resources, CA aims to remove the barriers that prevent students, particularly those from under-represented groups, from achieving their full potential.

Panzironi and Gelber (2012) stress that the mere addition of diverse content is not sufficient to achieve social inclusion in curriculum design. True inclusion means that all students should be able to participate fully, express their views, and contribute to shaping their learning environment, irrespective of their background. Inclusive curricula also need to recognise and value cultural identities and lived experiences of students, particularly of girls, children with disabilities, and students from minority groups.

Education systems using CA focus not only on providing access to education for students, but also on strengthening their voice, critical thinking, and sense of self-worth (Robeyns, 2017). As Unterhalter (2023) explains, achieving gender equality in education requires changes in institutional structures and interpersonal interactions, not just increased attendance rates. Walker (2006) adds that, although often overlooked in policy, the creation of a respectful and dignified learning environment is vital, particularly for girls.

In order to promote gender equality, the curricula should go beyond academics and address key issues such as student health, protection against discrimination and harassment, freedom to choose subjects, access to fair and inclusive learning materials, and the ability to develop

self-agency and personal goals. In evaluating learning, it's important to assess whether students' freedoms of choice are being limited, for example, through biased content, lack of support, or limited choice. CA framework calls for a shift away from a one-size-fits-all approach to assessment towards a more flexible and individualized approach.

CA also points out the learning experience of students is influenced by many factors such as gender, disability, and economic background (Broderick, 2018). It therefore supports inclusive strategies such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and personalised learning support. Education should help students to grow academically, socially, personally and as active members of society in addition to knowledge transfer.
However, CA is not without its challenges. It does not provide a set approach to deciding which ones to prioritise or how to allocate resources fairly. While scholars such as Nussbaum have suggested lists, Sen's CA does not provide a comprehensive list of capabilities required but rather determines them through local consultation and discussion (Wells, n.d.). Putting CA into practice may also require collecting detailed and sometimes difficult data on the individual needs and experiences of students (Robeyns, 2017). Yet the heart of CA lies in extending real freedom to students and giving them meaningful opportunities to learn and grow.

Conclusion

In conclusion, literature highlights that CA serves as a valuable evaluative tool for assessing a wide range of factors, including welfare, health, poverty, income, education, and overall economic development. In this study, CA was applied to examine how schools promote gender equality and social inclusion by focusing on 16 capability indicators identified through a capability mapping. The overarching aim was to assess school children's well-being, agency freedom, and achievement which will eventually support GESI**.** Existing literature supports the view that identifying such capability indicators not only helps evaluate educational outcomes but also reveals the resources and gaps necessary for nurturing and advancing children's values, aspirations, and overall development.

METHODOLOGY

Research Approach

The project employed Participatory Action Research (PAR). PAR is a subset of action research, defined as the “systematic collection and analysis of data for the purpose of taking action and making change” (Gillis & Jackson, 2002, p.264). This approach is aimed at studying a social system whilst attempting to change it, highlighting the significance of person-oriented attempts at solving particular social problems (Gillis & Jackson, 2002). In this study, PAR is divided into three main phases: Participation Axis; Knowledge Development Axis; and Action Axis.

The **Participation Axis** adopts the position of knowledge being a source of power in itself and that participants themselves generate valid knowledge and are thus empowered. As philosophically collaborative, democracy, creating a safe space, working collaboratively, and attending to different levels of participation are considered crucial to PAR (Bergold & Thomas, 2012). In this study, this involved engaging researchers, stakeholders, and beneficiaries in drawing up the CVEC (Child Valued Educational Capabilities) list, ensuring that their perspectives significantly influence the framework. Additionally, participants will be trained to critically assess and improve GESI practices and school functionality, addressing issues such as discriminatory norms, violence, harassment, and exclusion. Students will also be involved in capacity-building programmes that provide information and training to help them aspire to and work towards an improved school environment. Additionally, the community will also be involved in awareness and capacity building activities.

The **Knowledge Development Axis** focused on creating the GESI diagnostic transformative tool for gender equality, equity, and inclusion based on the data from the situational analysis study conducted in 26 schools of Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal. Additionally, a LIKE club activity book as an intervention was developed by Bhutan and Nepal based on the results of baseline data. About 64 activities have been created. This book is aimed at addressing core values related to developing children's capabilities, with methods and activities designed to enhance students’ participation in enhancing their understanding of GESI, building their capacity for sustained learning outcomes, and improving school safety and wellbeing.

The **Action Axis** involves creating a socially just world where power, resources, and responsibilities are shared more fairly. This calls for meaningful efforts to bring about real change. As Nelson and Prilleltensky (2010) argue, social transformation means questioning and reshaping the systems and beliefs that often maintain inequality (p. 144). This kind of change doesn’t happen in isolation; it requires the active involvement of both researchers and community members. In this study, researchers and participants collaboratively will be involved in implementing interventions such as launching LIKE Clubs, hosting awareness campaigns, and engaging in other community-based activities that aim to strengthen GESI in schools and beyond. This intervention will be conducted to create a self-sustaining, positive school environment and enhance student well-being. A school and community wide awareness campaigns aimed at fostering a self-managed and liberated school and community environment will be organised, ultimately improving both institutional well-being and students and community experiences.

The project is executed in 26 schools in Bhutan, Nepal and Bangladesh (See Table 2), with subsequent capacity-building programmes for the community, including principals, teachers, students, parents, administrative staff, Dzongkhag education office staff, policy makers, curriculum developers, local leaders, and others. Evaluations will guide further capacity-building efforts to sustain and extend the benefits of the programmes.

Table 2

Country wise School Numbers

Country	***School Number***
Bangladesh	8
Bhutan	5
Nepal	13

Context of the Study and Participant Selection

This study was conducted among secondary school children in Bhutan, within the policy frameworks of the National Gender Equality Policy (NGEP, 2020) and the NEP (2024). These policies envision a society where substantive equality is practised providing equal opportunities for all individuals, regardless of gender, to realise their full potential and benefit equitably from the country's social, economic, and political development (National Commission for Women and Children (NCWC), 2020).

The NEP places a strong emphasis on inclusivity and the recognition of diverse learner needs and talents. It considers factors such as gender, disability, learning differences, and socio-economic background, promoting equitable access to admissions, curriculum delivery, assessments, and extracurricular activities. Furthermore, the policy advocates the integration of mental and physical health education including stress management, emotional well-being, resilience, and coping mechanisms into the curriculum to equip both students and teachers with essential life skills for holistic well-being (MoESD, 2024).

Similarly, the NGEP is grounded in the belief that families, communities, and society as a whole benefit when both women and men are able to develop their capabilities free from gender stereotypes and discrimination (NCWC, 2020). However, the realisation of this vision is contingent upon its effective integration into school curricula and activities.

Recent research in Bhutan highlights the need to strengthen the implementation of GESI in schools, citing its current limited incorporation into educational content and practice (Yuden et al., 2021). This highlights the importance of translating policy commitments into concrete educational strategies to foster inclusive, equitable, safe, and supportive learning environments.

This research focuses on promoting gender equality and social inclusion by building on children’s valued educational capabilities to strengthen their overall well-being and agency freedom and achievement.

An approval to conduct the research in five schools of Samtse Dzongkhag was solicited form the Ministry of Education and Skills Development (MoESD). Following the approval, the five secondary schools in Samtse Dzongkhag (District). were approached for this study, all of which agreed to participate. From each school, two teachers (one male and one female) teaching Social Studies, Economics, or Geography were selected, making a total of 10 teacher participants along with 5 school principals. These teachers and principals voluntarily agreed to participate in the research.

Children from Grades 1-10 were included in the study. Informed consent was obtained from the schools, and teachers were asked to select a total of 200 students (two females and two males from each class) for the survey using a random yet strategic sampling approach to ensure gender balance and representation from all participating schools. The children ranged in age from 6 to 19 years, with a composite mean age of 12.

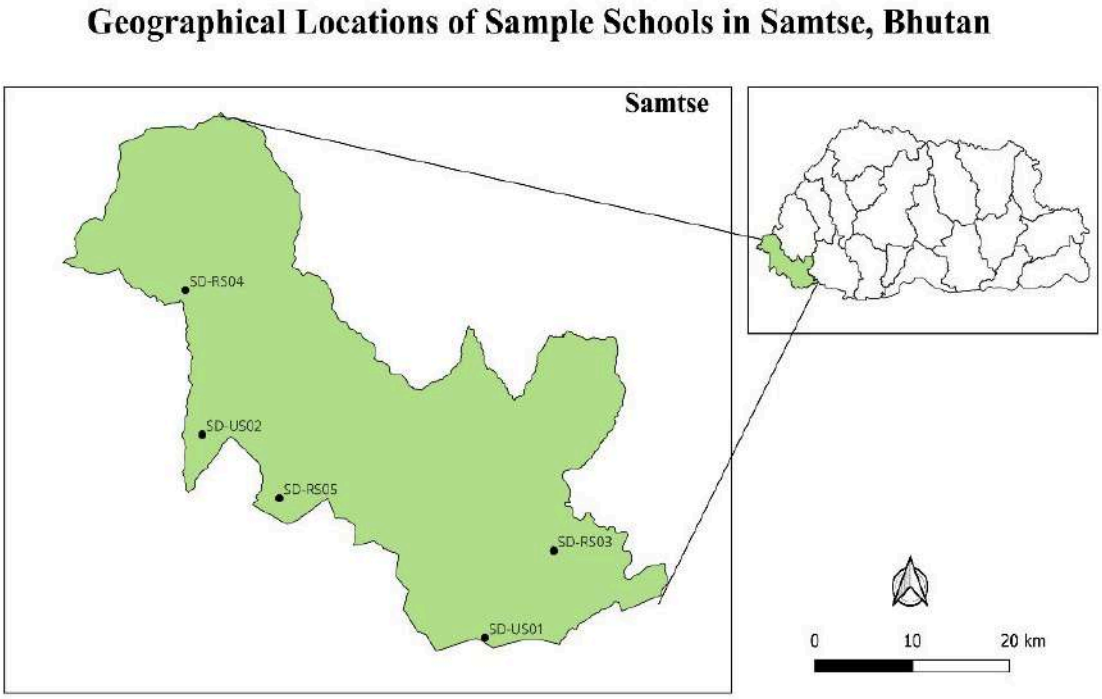
Research Field Site

Samtse Dzongkhag (District was selected as the research field site due to its diverse population, rich cultural heritage, varying socioeconomic conditions, and a mix of rural and urban school distributions. It is bordered by Chukha Dzongkhag in the east, Haa Dzongkhag in the north and the Indian state of West Bengal and Sikkim in the south and west respectively. It comprises two Dzongkhags which are Dorokha and Tashicholing.

The Dzongkhag spans an area of 1,305 square kilometres and has a population of 62,590, making it the most populous Dzongkhag in Bhutan (Wikipedia contributors, 2024). The region is known for its ethnic diversity, with a mix of Lhotshampas, Drukpas, Adibashi, and Doyaps contributing to its unique cultural landscape. In addition, Samtse's varied topography and climate, ranging from lowland plains to foothills, offer diverse environmental settings, further enriching the context of the research. Five schools of Samtse Dzongkhag are selected as research sites and a map showing school location and its background descriptions are provided below:

Figure 1:

A Map of showing the study site and the selected samples



School Background

1. Gomtu Higher Secondary School

Established in 1983 with just 200 school children and 7 teachers under the leadership of its first headmaster, Mr. M.K. Lama. Gomtu Higher Secondary School has steadily grown into a beacon of academic excellence in the region. Within just two years of its founding, the school began to gain a reputation for its commitment to quality education. In 1998, it was upgraded to a Junior High School, then to a Middle Secondary School in 2003, and finally attained Higher Secondary status in 2008.

Over the decades, the school has seen various leadership transitions, each bringing unique strengths and leaving behind a legacy of positive transformation. Among the many contributions, improvements in infrastructure stand out, notably, the installation of the *Mawongpa Water Project*, which now provides clean, cool drinking water to the school community. In 2019, the school also received a school bus, enhancing accessibility for school children.

The mission of Gomtu HSS is deeply rooted in providing a holistic, quality education that nurtures independence, cultural values, and global competence. The school envisions graduates who are not only academically proficient but also environmentally conscious, socially responsible, and actively engaged in both school and community life.

Currently, the school offers a complete education pathway from pre-primary through Grade 12. Its vision is built upon the foundational pillars of academic excellence, community service, leadership by example, and international-mindedness. These values shape the school's planning and execution of both academic and co-curricular activities.

Situated 52 kilometres from Samtse Dzongkhag. Headquartered and 70 kilometres from Bhutan's commercial hub, Phuentsholing, the school primarily serves the children of employees working at Penden Cement Authority Ltd (PCAL), Lhaki Cements, and nearby industries, along with those from the local community.

Today, Gomtu HSS is home to a vibrant and diverse educational environment with a total of 54 teaching staff (35 male and 19 female), 1002 children (475 male and 527 female), a dedicated male school counsellor, and 12 support staff (9 male and 3 female). The entire school community remains committed to nurturing an environment where every student feels seen, supported, and empowered to thrive.

2. **Peljorling Higher Secondary School**

Peljorling Higher Secondary School, established in 1955, is located in the lower Peljorling area under Tashicholing Gewog, Tashicholing Dungkhag, in Samtse Dzongkhag. Over the years, the surrounding area has developed into a semi-urban settlement. The school is situated approximately 50 kilometers from the district headquarters and occupies 16.5 acres of land, geographically positioned at 26.990° N and 88.889° E.

The school's vision is to nurture an educated and enlightened society guided by the principles of Gross National Happiness (GNH), grounded in the unique Bhutanese values of *tha dam-tsig ley gju-drey* (loyalty and cause-effect morality).

As of 2025, the school caters to 1,528 children (767 boys and 761 girls). While it offers boarding facilities, the majority of school children are day scholars, including 577 boys and 563 girls. The school has 86 teachers (42 male and 44 female). The school provides education from Pre-Primary (PP) to Grade 12. For higher secondary levels (Grades 11-12), it offers all three streams: Arts, Commerce, and Science.

3. **Tashithang Middle Secondary School**

Tashithang Middle Secondary School (MSS), originally established as Panbari Primary School in 1982, began as a community primary school with limited staff and students, supported by local efforts. After being closed in the 1990s, the school was reopened in 2008 and has since evolved into a thriving middle secondary school, now serving students from Pre-Primary to grade 10. Located on a serene 27-acre hilltop about 21 kilometers from Phuentsholing, the

school caters to students from five chiwogs under Tading Gewog in Samtse Dzongkhag. With a current enrollment of 652 school children (322 boys and 300 girls), Tashithang MSS is supported by a dedicated team of 30 teachers, 7 supporting staff, 5 cooks, 2 caretakers, and 2 sweepers.

The school plays a central role in the educational landscape of the region, serving as a host institution to several neighbouring schools including Taba Dramtoe PS, Norbugang CS, Dorokha CS, and Sengdhen LSS. Guided by its vision of fostering "an educated and enlightened society of GNH, built and sustained on the unique Bhutanese values of Tha Dam-Tsig Ley Gju-Drey," Tashithang MSS is deeply rooted in national values and aims to nurture responsible, value-driven citizens.

The mission of the school is threefold:

1. To develop sound educational policies that support a knowledge-based GNH society;
2. To provide equitable, inclusive, and quality education, enabling lifelong learning for all children;
3. To equip students with relevant knowledge, skills, and values necessary to face the challenges of the 21st century.

The school strongly upholds the value of *Tha-Dam-Tse-Ley-Zhumdrey,* emphasising dedication and loyalty to *Tsa-Wa-Sum* (the King, the Country, and the People), forming the moral foundation of its educational approach. Tashithang MSS stands as a beacon of holistic and value-based education in the region, committed to shaping future-ready, responsible citizens.

4. Tendruk Central School

Established in 1978, Tendruk Central School is a Higher Secondary School offering education from Pre-Primary (PP) to grades 12. The school is located on a sprawling 20.328-acre campus, providing a conducive learning environment for its 1,171 students comprising 591 boys and 580 girls.

The school operates a boarding facility that accommodates 185 boys and 175 girls, including 9 boys and 13 girls under its inclusive education programmes, affirming its commitment to equity and support for diverse learners. With a total of 73 teachers (45 male and 28 female), the school ensures that students receive quality instruction and guidance.

Guided by its vision to become a distinguished centre of learning rooted in the principles of Gross National Happiness, the school strives for academic excellence while nurturing the emotional, social, and moral well-being of its students. Its mission emphasises the delivery of quality and holistic education, aiming to empower students with critical life skills and prepare them to make meaningful contributions to their communities, the nation, and the world at large. Recognized as an inclusive school, Tendruk Central School stands out for embracing diversity and promoting equal learning opportunities for all students.

5. Yoeseltse Higher Secondary School

Located 27 kilometres away from Samtse Dzongkhag headquarters in Yoeseltse Gewog, the school has a rich and resilient history that speaks volumes about the spirit of its community.

Originally established in 1961 as a primary school in Guamauney, Samtse, the school was compelled to shut down due to political tensions that gripped the southern region during the 2000s. However, with renewed commitment and support, it was later reopened as a Lower Secondary School. Over the years, it was upgraded to a Middle Secondary School and, most recently in 2023, formally upgraded to a full-fledged Higher Secondary School.
Today, the school caters to 587 school children, including 304 males and 285 females, with the youngest being just 5 years old and the oldest 22 years old. The dedicated teacher team comprises 45 teachers (32 male and 13 female), who work tirelessly to uphold the school's standards and nurture each learner. Despite its remote location and humble beginnings, the school continues to flourish, standing tall as a symbol of perseverance, growth, and holistic education.

Choice of Field Site

The research sites were selected considering a number of factors, which are discussed below:

1. ***Diverse Demographic***

Samtse has diverse ethnic groups including the Lhotshampas, Adibashi, Doyaps, and others and considering this as a factor, Samtse Dzongkhag was identified as a research site. Thus, providing an appropriate setting to explore the research question across a spectrum of ethnicities. The Dzongkhag representing diverse socio-economic backgrounds, ethnicities, and family backgrounds enabled a comprehensive understanding of how different demographic factors may impact levels of GESI within the education system.

2. **School**

In this study, government schools from both rural and urban settings from Samtse Dzongkhags were included as research sites. Inclusion of schools situated in both rural and urban settings allowed the study to explore various factors that shape educational endeavours. By examining the two settings, the study explored the multifaceted impact of economic activities, social dynamics, cultural norms, and access to essential services on gender and disadvantaged communities. Additionally, the settings illuminated how geographical context can shape gender roles, societal expectations, and access to resources. Understanding the interaction between these factors offered valuable insights for crafting more inclusive policies and interventions.

3. ***Socio-economic status***

Socio-economic hierarchies are prominent in Samtse, so students from various socioeconomic backgrounds were sampled. Thus, ensuring a comprehensive exploration of how socioeconomic status influences educational experiences and outcomes, contributing to a deeper understanding of equity and inclusivity in education.

4. ***Gender Stereotypes***

Diversity within the study areas provided opportunities to explore the influence of stereotypical beliefs of different cultures on students' education and career aspirations. These stereotypes seem to be more prevalent in the Southern districts, which allowed the study to examine the influence of culture-based gender practices that could inform new policies about gender equality and challenge harmful stereotypes.

5. ***Gender Balance***

According to the Annual Education Statistics (2023) provided in Table 3, there is near parity enrolment of girls and boys in grades 1-10 across the nation. The data collected from the schools for the selected research schools also indicate a nearly close enrolment of girls and boys (Table 4). This equal distribution of gender within the selected grades presents an opportunity to comprehensively capture a diverse array of perspectives, challenges, and aspirations. It ensures that both girls' and boys' voices and experiences were adequately recognised and understood within the study.

Table 3:

National Primary Enrolment 2023

Grade	**Female**	**Male**	**Total**
1	5441	5647	11,088
2	6293	6489	12,782
3	7746	7478	15,224
4	7,233	7,439	14,672
5	6,569	6,283	12,852
6	5,732	5,334	11,066
7	6869	6448	13,316
8	8359	6856	15,215
9	4380	4279	8650
10	5877	4954	10,831
Grand Total	**64499**	**61207**	**125,696**

Table 4:

Selected School's Enrolment for Grade (1-10) as of 2025

School	Grade	Boys	Girls	Total
SD-US01-Gomtu Middle Secondary School	1	29	27	56
	2	26	30	56
	3	28	32	60
	4	61	61	122
	5	53	50	103
	6	56	53	109
	7	32	48	80
	8	41	68	109
	9	43	35	78
	10	47	51	98
		416	**455**	**871**
SD-US02-Peljorling Higher Secondary School	1	32	30	62
	2	34	42	76
	3	37	27	64
	4	45	38	83
	5	51	60	111
	6	38	37	75
	7	99	85	184
	8	110	136	246
	9	88	68	156
	10	54	64	118
		678	**652**	**1330**

School	Grade	Boys	Girls	Total
SD-RS03-Tashithang Middle Secondary School	1	15	16	31
	2	19	19	38
	3I	21	20	41
	4	29	28	57
	5	23	23	46
	6	24	35	59
	7	31	32	63
	8	54	52	106
	9	22	26	48
	10	44	47	91
		282	**298**	**580**
SD-RS04-Tendru Central School	1	25	37	62
	2	33	28	61
	3	30	24	54
	4	38	33	71
	5	41	58	99
	6	58	46	104
	7	46	48	94
	8	61	54	115
	9	48	50	98
	10	45	72	117
		421	**450**	**871**
SD-RS05-Yeoltse Higher Secondary School	1	16	17	33
	2	23	19	42

School	Grade	Boys	Girls	Total
	3	25	20	45
	4	48	42	90
	5	24	19	43
	6	41	32	73
	7	21	28	49
	8	28	29	57
	9	16	25	41
	10	25	28	53
Total		**293**	**277**	**570**

Sample selection and justification

The study employed purposive sampling to select five schools in Bhutan offering Grades 1-10 as the research sites. The selection process was designed to capture a diverse array of geographical, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds, ensuring comprehensive representation across various socio-cultural contexts. Additionally, considerations were made to ensure a balanced representation of both rural and urban settings, and a diverse range of backgrounds, including variables such as parental education and financial standing.

Each of these selected schools will contribute through their student populations, as well as the involvement of 10 teachers as GESI implementers and 5 principals and 5 Vice Principals as focal points, who will play pivotal roles in the school and our research. Under the Participation axis, 40 school children from each school were selected as research participants, with four students representing two male and two female participants from each grade (I to X). Additionally, 10 teachers were selected from the 5 sample schools, with 1 male and 1 female teacher participants from each school, teaching either Social Studies, Geography, or Economics. 5 school principals were approached to solicit further clarification and queries related to the field observations.

Although some studies suggest that children below the age of seven or eight are not ideal participants for Participatory Action Research (PAR) interviews or discussions or surveys, primarily due to Piagetian theories that characterize children at this stage as ‘concrete’ thinkers (Berns, 2004; Fraser, 2004; Woodhead & Faulkner, 2000), this study included younger children due to the selected grade range (Grades 1-10). Consequently, children under the age of eight were involved in PAR survey discussions with support from their respective focal teachers, who guided and assisted them in understanding and completing the survey questionnaires.

The inclusion of these children is supported by Vygotskian perspectives and other socio-cultural theorists who view children as active social agents, communicators, and meaning-makers within their own contexts (Fraser, 2004; Scott, 2000). These theorists emphasise that research should consider not only cognitive development but also social development, which is shaped by factors such as age, gender, socio-economic status, and ethnicity (Amato & Ochiltree, 1987; Scott, 2000).

In this light, older and more cognitively mature children were encouraged to assist younger peers in interpreting the survey instruments. Their participation was deemed essential to capture their voices on educational capabilities and understand what they value and aspire to do and become. Furthermore, recognising potential language barriers, developmental challenges, and the limitations of self-understanding, key concepts were explained in the children's local language to ensure meaningful engagement with the survey by the focal teachers.

Data Collection

The data were collected utilizing surveys, field observations, and focus group discussions (FGDs). These tools were designed to explore students' perceptions of the availability, satisfaction, and importance of school resources in supporting their well-being. The tools also focused on students' perceptions of 16 educational capabilities, assessed through the Capability Approach (CA) framework. The framework was structured around four core well-being metrics: i) Well-being Freedom; ii) Well-being Achievement; iii) Agency Freedom; and iv) Agency Achievement. Two teacher participants from each respective school were involved in the baseline data collection. They administered the GESI diagnostic survey tool to children at their convenience, typically in three groups (Grades 1-3, 4-7, 8-10), with each session lasting between one to three hours. The survey duration varied according to children's grade and comprehension levels. Children ranging from Grades 1-3 and 4-7 required more time to complete the survey due to difficulties in comprehending some of the survey items while those in Grades 8–10 required just over an hour, indicating children with higher comprehension levels completed the surveys in a shorter time.

The GESI diagnostic survey tool comprised Section A, which included demographic information, assessment of school resources, and children's valued educational capabilities. For school resources, 13 capability indicators were included: 1) Love, care and respect, 2) Education, 3) Nutritional well-being , 4) Aspiration and freedom from economic/non-economic exploitation, 5) Physical health and GESI curriculum, 6) Bodily integrity and GESI curriculum, 7) The ability to understand, interpret, plan/imagine and think, 8) Religion and identity, 9) Shelter and environment, 10) Mental well-being, 11) Social relations, 12) Autonomy and freedom from exploitation, and 13) Participation and mobility with a total of 28 items.

CVEC were assessed using 16 indicators comprising 130 items. These included: 1) Love, care and respect, 2) Education, 3) Nutritional well-being, 4) Aspiration, 5) Physical health, 6) Bodily integrity, 7) The ability to understand, interpret, plan/imagine and think, 8) Religion and identity, 9) Shelter and environment, 10) Mental well-being, 11) Social relations, 12) Autonomy, 13)

Freedom from economic and non-economic exploitation, 14) Participation, 15) Mobility, and 16) Gender Equality and Social Inclusion curriculum.

For the resource section, children's perceptions regarding availability, satisfaction, and importance were gathered. For the educational capabilities section, students' perceptions were evaluated using four core well-being metrics: i) Well-being freedom, ii) Well-being achievement, iii) Agency freedom, and iv) Agency achievement.

The tool was first administered in 13 schools in Nepal, which helped establish its reliability. Additionally, to contextualise the tool, the GESI diagnostic was adapted and tested for reliability, yielding a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.99, showing a highly internal consistency.

The data collection session was followed by informal conversations to explore children's perceptions of the survey. These discussions invited children to reflect on how they felt during the survey, what they found interesting, and which aspects they considered most important.

Field Notes, Photographs, and Informal Conversation

One of the methods for capturing data from field observation used in this study was by recording field notes (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). Field notes are a fundamental data collection tool for this study. The field notes were maintained on field observations that were conducted between 24th March and 6th April 2025, to provide context to the survey data. Field notes in the form of taking quick notes, sketches, and noting the specific time of the event or informal conversations with students and teachers were used to obtain relevant information for subsequent data analysis.
It allows researchers to record contextual, behavioural, and environmental details that may not be captured through structured instruments like surveys. In this study, these notes helped to document observations related to resources and activities available within schools for promoting activities in line to CVEC. Emerson et al. (2011) argue that field notes are essential for developing rich, detailed descriptions of social settings and interactions. They emphasise that field notes "translate observations into written form" and capture the subtleties of participant behaviour, which is crucial for interpreting the social world. Further, Robeyns (2005) argues that field notes are vital in understanding what individuals value and have reason to value which is a core concern of the CA. Such methods help go beyond statistical indicators and offer nuanced insights into real freedoms and agency. In this study, notes on specific observations made on activities that promote CVEC were noted Further, photographs that support the capabilities were captured to validate field notes. Pink (2013) asserts that photographs can serve as ethnographic tools that complement field notes by capturing material realities and spatial arrangements, especially in educational research.

Any additional information and clarification required on observed field data were solicited through informal conversations with school children, teachers, and principals to enhance credibility and ensure participants' voices are authentically represented. These informal conversations were then recorded in the field notes. Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe informal dialogue as a form of naturalistic inquiry, which helps check researcher interpretations and promotes trustworthiness of the data. In this study, questions were posed to school children,

teachers, and the school principal to further clarify and enrich the insights recorded in the field notes with regard to the capabilities, providing valuable clarifications and insights that helped to enrich the survey findings.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were employed to aggregate students' perceptions of the availability, satisfaction, and importance of resources for advancing Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) in schools. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, means, and standard deviations, were used to summarise demographic data and to interpret children's perceptions of the resources examining their perceptions to availability, level of satisfaction, and perceived importance. To compare demographic variables such as gender, age, and location with capability indicators across different schools, within-school mean analyses were conducted. Furthermore, to assess children's perceived levels of capabilities (example, love, care, and respect) for significant social groups (parents, teachers, elders, juniors, and friends), descriptive statistics were used. The analysis involved five schools in Samtse Dzongkhag, Bhutan. These capabilities were evaluated using a 0–10 scale across 20 variables, combining dimensions of Well-being, Agency, Freedom, and Achievement. The descriptive analysis included: 1) Measures of Central Tendency (mean and median), 2) Measures of Dispersion (standard deviation, minimum, and maximum), 3) Distribution Shape Metrics (skewness and kurtosis), and 4) Boxplot Visualizations to present variability and central tendency.

In addition, qualitative data on GESI-related initiatives and activities were collected through field notes which were further supported by photographs. The queries and clarification needed on the field notes were sought and clarified through informal conversation with school children, teachers, and principals. These data were analysed following the predetermined survey themes. Particular attention was paid to capturing the distinct perspectives of both students and teachers, ensuring their voices were meaningfully represented. To maintain confidentiality during interpretation, general pseudonyms such as children and teachers were used without assigning specific labels (e.g., C1 or T1) to individuals.

To enhance the credibility and reliability of the findings, the data were interpreted collaboratively by the project core members and researchers. Multiple analytical methods were employed to cross-verify results, and efforts were made to minimize bias through team discussions and peer reviews. Data triangulation within the multiple sources were conducted to verify and validate the findings. Consultations with the lead country team made the data entry and interpretation work easier, improving the efficiency and accuracy of the process. Finally, the project's core team conducted a detailed review and revision of the analysis to ensure logical flow, linguistic clarity, and analytical precision.

Ethical considerations

When conducting the study, ethical considerations for the participants were vital. It was essential to ensure their safety, confidentiality, and overall well-being (Efron & Ravid, 2013). In this research, throughout the research process, the ethical principles of research were followed.

Principals of five schools in Samtse Dzongkhags were contacted and asked for permission to approach school children of Grades 1-10. In addition, the GESI diagnostic tool included a dedicated section on informed consent, ensuring that participants were made fully aware of the study's purpose, their rights, and the voluntary nature of their participation. Teachers administering the survey explained the contents clearly, and school children were given the option to opt out without any consequences. Anonymity and confidentiality of all responses were maintained throughout the process. The data were stored properly and participants' anonymity was taken into account in the processing of the data.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings from the Participatory Action Research (PAR) study that explores the availability, satisfaction, and perceived importance of resources in relation to children's valued educational capabilities for promoting their overall well-being.

Reliability Analysis

The reliability analysis was performed based on 187 complete responses, ensuring accuracy by excluding cases with incomplete data. The reduction in valid cases was primarily because some respondents chose to leave certain items unrated, which were treated as missing values during data punching, thereby rendering those cases incomplete for the analysis. In total, 13 respondents (6.5%) left one or more items blank or unrated (Table 5a). Out of 200 responses, 187 valid cases (93.5%) were retained for the reliability analysis using listwise deletion. The analysis yielded a **Cronbach's Alpha of 0.989** across **560 items**, indicating **excellent internal consistency** of the instrument (Table 5b).

Table 5a. *Case Processing Summary*

		N	%
Cases	Valid	187	93.5
	Excluded[a]	13	6.5
	Total	200	100.0

a. Listwise deletion based on all variables in the procedure.

Table 5b. *Reliability Statistics*

Cronbach's Alpha	Number of Items
.989	560

1. **Resources - Love, Care and Respect**

The three domains reflect school children's experiences of *Love, Care and Respect* through their social and emotional connections with friends and family. The analysis indicates that, overall, children report having ample time, express satisfaction, and assign high importance to these relationships. Specifically, survey ratings revealed high levels of perceived availability (M=4.29) and satisfaction (M=4.24) with time spent with friends and family, suggesting that most children are well supported in maintaining interpersonal connections. The importance attributed to these relationships was notably high (M=4.67), indicating that such bonds are considered essential to children's emotional well-being (Table 6). Although responses were generally consistent, the presence of a few low ratings suggests that some children may lack this form of support, highlighting potential GESI concerns that may require potential school-based intervention.

Table 6. *Descriptive summary of Children's responses (N = 200)*

Variables	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev.
1. Availability Time spent with friends and families	200	.00	5.00	4.20	1.06
2. Satisfaction Time spent with friends and families	200	1.00	5.00	4.20	.97
3. Importance Time spent with friends and families	200	1.00	5.00	4.67	.71
Composite mean				4.36	.91

Supporting the survey data, the field data reports that school children organise surprise birthday celebrations for their teachers as a gesture of respect and gratitude for their dedication. Similarly, teachers report that they use their personal vehicles to transport children for school exchange programmes and to take sick children to hospitals. These practices reflect the strong bonds of care, respect, and mutual support that exist between children and teachers and also time spent with their loved ones.

In addition, to promote social interaction and strengthen relationships among class children, individual class teachers organize class picnics as informal gatherings. However, a teacher said that schools do not allocate funds to support these activities. Nevertheless, such initiatives foster love for and love by, care for and care by, and respect for and respect by both teachers and class children while also encouraging meaningful time spent with friends and loved ones.
Moreover, core values that encourages love, care, and respect are displayed across the school's walls to encourage positive relationships and mutual respect among children as shown in the following photographs:

Photographs 1: Core Values

The analysis of this CA emphasises the foundation role of love, care, and respect in fostering children' social and emotional development, with high levels of perceived availability, satisfaction, and importance of interpersonal relationships in schools. Survey findings (mean availability = 4.29; satisfaction = 4.24) show that children highly value caring relationships, while qualitative reports show culturally embedded performances of caring for one another, e.g., teachers accompanying children to sites and children showing respect to teachers. Aligning the finding with Nussbaum (2011), Domínguez-Serrano et al. (2018), and Guo et al. (2020), the analysis concludes that emotional and affiliative capacities facilitate inclusive and equitable learning settings. However, isolated low scores imply relational exclusion threats which require the urgency of GESI-sensitive interventions in the interests of emotionally safe and valued children, especially the marginalized, at school.

1. **Resources - Education**

As shown in Table 7, school children generally reported high availability and satisfaction with resources concerning education capability indicators, including teachers, textbooks, stationery, whiteboards/blackboards, and uniforms. The composite means of 4.30 indicates favourable perceptions overall. Teacher-related items were rated particularly high in terms of importance (M = 4.88), while resources such as stationery and textbooks showed slightly lower availability (M = 3.77–3.78) but remained highly valued (M = 4.72–4.75). While the data suggest broadly favourable access and satisfaction, some variation in availability, particularly in textbooks and stationery, indicates possible disparities. These findings suggest the need for schools to ensure consistent provision and equitable access to key educational resources to uphold principles of Gender Equity and Social Inclusion. Supported by Sen (1999), Aikman and Unterhalter (2007), Sharma et al. (2012), and UNESCO (2020), the discussion arrives at the conclusion that inclusive education necessitates policy intervention in the system to help address learning material inequalities to ensure no child is left behind.

Table 7. *Descriptive Statistics of Children's Responses of Resources for Education Capability (N = 200)*

Variables	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev.
1. Availability Adequate number of teachers	200	1.00	5.00	4.09	1.03
2. Satisfaction Adequate number of teachers	200	1.00	5.00	4.12	1.03
3. Importance Adequate number of teachers	200	3.00	5.00	4.88	.37
4. Availability Textbooks	200	1.00	5.00	3.77	1.11
5. Satisfaction Textbooks	200	1.00	5.00	3.80	1.18
6. Importance Textbooks	200	.00	5.00	4.72	.78
7. Availability Stationary	200	.00	5.00	3.78	1.50
8. Satisfaction Stationary	200	.00	5.00	3.95	1.39
9. Importance Stationary	200	.00	5.00	4.75	.78
10. Availability White/Blackboard	200	1.00	5.00	4.20	1.32
11. Satisfaction White/Blackboard	200	1.00	5.00	4.00	1.35
12. Importance White/Blackboard	200	.00	5.00	4.81	.73
13. Availability Uniform	200	.00	5.00	4.52	1.09
14. Satisfaction Uniform	200	.00	5.00	4.41	1.13
15. Importance Uniform	200	.00	5.00	4.82	.77
Composite mean				**4.30**	**1.03**

With regard to availability, satisfaction and importance of teachers, field data shows that most schools reported experiencing a heavy workload due to teacher attrition in the country. This indicates availability of teachers in most schools is inadequate. However, one of the schools indicated that it had an adequate number of teachers, thereby enabling them to manage the teaching learning environment effectively and efficiently.

Walker (2005) asserts that education serves as a measure of social justice, as equitable access to educational resources directly affects individuals' ability to function and thrive. Consistent with this, teachers were asked to share their experiences with regards to textbooks and stationeries availability and accessibility, a must have educational resources for children in their schools, and their views offered regular challenges along with varied support mechanisms. Among the issues that all the respondents cited was often inadequate availability of new textbooks, and most of the children had to settle for old books. Teachers said that books distributed by the Ministry of Education and Skills Development (MoESD) remain in circulation for around three years, and new books are in use only if there are sufficient copies. As a result, many children receive old or second-hand books. Still, in stationeries, the prevailing trend observed is one of individual acquisition, where children are expected to buy their own learning materials on their own. However, financially less-privileged children are supported by the school. While some teachers offer direct assistance to those who need it, others reported informing of school-based initiatives called 'Opening heart to Bhutan' that provides rations and essential stationery to school children. Only one school was reported to offer stationeries in direct forms. These findings indicate not only the systemic problems of the unavailability of educational material but also the ad hoc arrangements set up within schools to ensure no single child is forgotten. Despite

resource limitations, the dedication of teachers and school communities to provide support to underprivileged children reflects high caring and responsibility culture.

2. Resources - Nutritional Well-being

As presented in Table 8, children's responses showed that they viewed the provision of mid-day meals as positively. The composite means of 4.64 reflects high availability (M = 4.67), satisfaction (M = 4.41), and perceived importance (M = 4.84) of this nutritional support. The low standard deviations suggest strong agreement among children across all five different schools, highlighting the importance of mid-day meals in children's well-being. This finding suggests that the school environment generally supports nutritional well-being for all children, regardless of gender or social background. The high ratings for availability, satisfaction, and importance of mid-day meals reflect that these resources are accessible and valued by children across the five schools. Therefore, from a GESI perspective, this trend is promising as it indicates that the nutritional support provided by the school is likely inclusive and equitable, benefiting all children equally. While the freedom of choices is limited, the provision of nutritious foods is a fair policy that aligns with GESI initiatives. This is supported by literature that concludes that such school nutrition support systems are not welfare policies but critical systems enhancing children's capabilities and agency, particularly for economically or socially disadvantaged learners (Gombert et al., 2017; Sen, 1999; Venkatapuram, 2011).

Table 8. *Descriptive Statistics of Children's Responses of Resources for Nutritional well-being*

Variables	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev.
1. Availability Provision of mid-day meal	200	.00	5.00	4.67	.88
2. Satisfaction Provision of mid-day meal	200	.00	5.00	4.41	.97
3. Importance Provision of mid-day meal	200	.00	5.00	4.84	.63
Composite Mean				**6.64**	**.82**

The availability, satisfaction, and importance of mid-day meal is also reported in the field data. The data stated that schools with boarding facilities offered structured food and accommodation arrangements. School children report that meals consisting of balanced diets were served regularly, although the fixed menu limits individual choice. Nonetheless, the basic nutritional and residential needs of borders are being met. An example of menu is attached below:

Photograph 2: School Menu

Days/Meals	Breakfast	Lunch	Dinner
Monday	Fried Rice	Rice	Rice
	Milk	Mixed vegetables	Alu Dum (Mashed Potatoes)
		Dhal (Lentil Soup)	Dhal (Lentil Soup)

Tuesday	Rice	Rice	Rice
	Hot water	Chicken Gravy (Non-Veg)	Mixed Vegetable Curry
	Boiled Egg	Veg/Kewa (Potato)/ Mushroom Cheese curry	Dhal (Lentil Soup)
	Ezay	Dhal (Lentil Soup)	
Wednesday	Fried Rice	Rice	Rice
	Egg Curry	Mixed Vegetables	Chicken Gravy (Non-Veg)
		Dhal (Lentil Soup)	Veg/Kewa/ Mushroom Cheese curry
Thursday	Rice	Rice	Rice
	Chickpeas Curry	Egg Gravy Curry	Mixed Vegetables Curry
	Hot water	Vegetable/Kewa (Potato) Cheese Curry	Dhal (Lentil Soup)
		Dhal (Lentil Soup)	
Friday	Fried Rice	Rice	Rice
	Egg Curry	Egg Gravy Curry	Mixed Vegetables Curry
	Milk	Vegetable/Kewa (Potato) Cheese Curry	Dhal (Lentil Soup)
		Dhal (Lentil Soup)	
Saturday	Fried Rice	Rice	Rice
	Hot Water	Egg Gravy Curry	Egg Gravy Curry
		Vegetable/Kewa (Potato) Cheese Curry	Vegetable/Kewa (Potato) Cheese Curry
		Dhal (Lentil Soup)	Dhal

Sunday	Fried Rice	Rice	Rice
	Hot Water	Alu Dum (Mashed Potatoes)	Potato Curry
		Dhal (Lentil Soup)	Dhal (Lentil Soup)

In addition, visual displays on campus including a food pyramid and basic health and safety tips serve as informative tools. Teachers shared that the boards are updated approximately every two weeks to ensure children are exposed to fresh, relevant content. Conversation with the officiating principal and teachers revealed that morning breakfast, lunch, tea, fruits and yogurts are also provided to the children on a daily basis. Children confirmed that they received tea and lunch on the day of the data collection.

Photographs 3: Boards displaying food pyramid and basic health and safety tips

3. Resources - Aspiration

The overall composite means of 4.47 (SD = 1.05), as presented in Table 8, summarises children's collective responses regarding scholarships, indicating a generally positive evaluation across all three variables (availability, satisfaction, and importance). This suggests that scholarships are considered a vital resource for mitigating both economic and non-economic exploitation, supporting children's educational goals, and promoting social inclusion within educational contexts. The children's responses indicate that scholarships are viewed as a highly beneficial resource, fostering educational equity and aspiration while reducing the potential for economic exploitation. The overall trend reflects broad satisfaction and underscores the significance of financial support in enabling children to achieve their academic objectives.

Table 8. *Descriptive Statistics of Children's Responses on Scholarship Availability, Satisfaction, and Importance*

Variables	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev.
1. Availability Scholarship	200	.00	5.00	4.35	1.13
2. Satisfaction Scholarship	200	.00	5.00	4.32	1.19
3. Importance Scholarship	200	.00	5.00	4.75	.84
Composite Mean				**4.47**	**1.05**

In support of survey results, conversations with teachers revealed that schools in Bhutan do not offer scholarships in the conventional sense, as education is provided free of cost. However, one of the teachers explained that while a minimal fee is charged by schools, children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds are exempted. Another teacher shared that an initiative called Opening Heart to Bhutan, managed by a staff member at his school, provides free stationery and rations to underprivileged children. Similarly, another teacher mentioned that the school offers free boarding facilities to children from low-income families.

Teachers also highlighted that economically challenged children benefit from Royal support initiatives such as the *Gyalpoi Tozey* or *Kidu*, granted by His Majesty the King. These findings suggest that scholarship-like practices in schools are primarily service-oriented, focusing on addressing children's socio-economic needs rather than performance-based. Similarly, studies reinforce the idea that these practices are significant in helping disadvantaged children realise their aspirations while also safeguarding them from both economic and non-economic forms of exploitation (Anand et al., 2009; Nussbaum, 2016; Shneyder et al., 2021), and). Policies must, thus, institutionalise and scale up such support systems so that aspiration and opportunity are also available to all, regardless of socio-economic status.

4. Resource - Physical Health/ Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Curriculum

As presented in Table 9, children' survey responses indicate a generally positive perception of the physical health resources provided in schools. The overall composite means of 4.33 (SD=1.02) reflects high ratings for the availability, satisfaction, and perceived importance of safe drinking water (M = 4.41; M = 4.17; M = 4.93) and first aid provision (M = 4.36; M = 4.12; M = 4.85). While playground access also received favourable importance ratings (M = 4.42), slightly lower satisfaction (M = 3.71) and availability (M = 4.07) scores, pointing to slight variability in children's experiences. These findings suggest that while basic physical health-related infrastructure is largely in place, there is room to enhance both quality and accessibility, particularly in ways that ensure equitable benefit for all children, thereby supporting the areas of Gender Equity and Social Inclusion.

Table 9. *Descriptive Statistics of Children's Responses on Physical Health and GESI Curriculum Resources*

Variables	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
1. Availability Safe and clean drinking water	200	1.00	5.00	4.41	.95
2. Satisfaction Safe and clean drinking water	200	1.00	5.00	4.17	1.03
3. Importance Safe and clean drinking water	200	2.00	5.00	4.93	.34
4. Availability First aid	200	.00	5.00	4.36	.96
5. Satisfaction First aid	200	.00	5.00	4.12	1.17
6. Importance First aid	200	.00	5.00	4.85	.70
7. Availability Playground	200	.00	5.00	4.07	1.38
8. Satisfaction Playground	200	.00	5.00	3.71	1.45
9. Importance Playground	200	.00	5.00	4.42	1.21
Composite Mean				**4.33**	**1.02**

The survey results are further supported by field data whereby the data indicates that four schools have availability of proper sporting facilities such as a football ground, volleyball and basketball courts, and indoor game areas as shown in the following photographs.

Photographs 4: Sporting facilities in Peljorling Higher Secondary School

Photograph 5: Football ground in Yoeltse Higher Secondary School

Photographs 6: Sporting facilities in Gomtu Higher Secondary School

These indicate that schools value healthy living. However, one of the schools lacks these facilities and school children in that school use the school assembly ground as a makeshift sports ground where they play football, futsal, and volleyball as evident in image 6. In such circumstances, studies such as (Broderick, 2018; Chiappero-Martinetti et al., 2021; Till et al., 2021), highlight that while these infrastructures are not available, children's own personal and contextual conditions such as motivation and health knowledge allows them to engage in activities that improve health capability.

Photographs 7: School Assembly Ground in Tashithang Middle Secondary School

These field data were further confirmed through informal conversation with both teachers and children, who acknowledged the lack of proper sporting amenities at the school. The teacher stated that absence of dedicated sports facilities hinders children from achieving optimal physical and mental well-being. Further, informal conversation with children reports that access to such facilities is essential for maintaining a healthy and active lifestyle.

Therefore, realising GESI outcomes hinges on both systematic investment in infrastructure and regard for personal and environmental conditions of children to be able to guarantee that every child can appropriately access and enjoy health-enabling opportunities.

5. Resource - Bodily Integrity/ Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Curriculum

Children's survey responses regarding resources associated with bodily integrity and inclusivity reflect mixed perceptions (Table 10). The overall composite means of 3.96 (SD = 1.15) suggests moderate overall satisfaction and availability, with significant variation across specific resources. While the provision of separate toilets for girls and boys is both highly available (M = 4.82) and regarded as important (M = 4.83), the quality of toilet facilities themselves received notably lower satisfaction scores (M = 2.89). Similarly, although the provision for sanitary pads (M = 3.92) and its importance (M = 4.75) was positively rated, satisfaction levels were less strong (M = 3.71), indicating possible gaps in implementation. Of particular concern is the relatively low availability (M = 3.20) and satisfaction (M = 3.13) with disabled-friendly infrastructure, despite a high importance rating (M = 4.59).

These findings suggest that while foundational structures promoting bodily integrity are in place, inconsistencies in quality and accessibility remain, especially for girls and children with disabilities. The data highlight the need for targeted improvements to ensure all children can access school environments that uphold dignity, health, and safety in line with the principles of GESI.

Table 10. *Descriptive Statistics of Children's Responses on Bodily Integrity and GESI Curriculum Resources*

Variables	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
1. Availability Separate toilets for girls and boys	200	.00	5.00	4.82	.60
2. Satisfaction Separate toilets for girls and boys	200	1.00	5.00	4.13	1.21

3. Importance Separate toilets for girls and boys	200	1.00	5.00	4.83	.55
4. Availability Facilities inside the toilet	200	.00	5.00	3.05	1.33
5. Satisfaction Facilities inside the toilet	200	.00	5.00	2.89	1.38
6. Importance Facilities inside the toilet	200	.00	5.00	4.60	.96
7. Availability Provision for sanitary pads	200	.00	5.00	3.92	1.39
8. Satisfaction Provision for sanitary pads	200	.00	5.00	3.71	1.35
9. Importance Provision for sanitary pads	200	.00	5.00	4.75	.76
10. Availability Disabled friendly infrastructure	200	.00	5.00	3.20	1.69
11. Satisfaction Disabled friendly infrastructure	200	.00	5.00	3.13	1.61
12. Importance Disabled friendly infrastructure	200	.00	5.00	4.59	1.05
Composite Mean				**3.96**	**1.15**

As reported in the survey data and reflected in the informal conversation with children across all five schools, there is a shared sense of dissatisfaction with the sanitation facilities. Although field visits confirmed that to promote bodily integrity among children, drinking water was made available and accessible to children along with separate toilets for boys and girls, the toilets are often unhygienic and unclean due to an acute shortage of water. Additionally, the absence of sanitation supplies in all school toilets was a consistent observation, further compromising hygiene standards. On the contrary, sanitary pads and proper disposal facilities have been made available for girls, supporting menstrual hygiene management. Despite these efforts, the lack of adequate water supply poses a serious challenge to maintaining basic hygiene and sanitation, potentially affecting children's health and well-being. In light of the unavailability of such facilities, it becomes difficult to transcend the existence of resources to include functionality and attention to human dignity as indicated by studies (Nussbaum, 2000; IEP, n.d; Smith et al., 2023).

Therefore, this study concludes that interventions must address both the availability of these resources and children's ability to convert these resources into functionalities so all children both male and female, and disabled are able to feel safe, included and have access to equitable resources, leading to well-being achievement.

Photographs 8: Drinking Water



Photographs 9: Toilet Facilities



6. Resource - Understand, Interpret Plan/Imagine and Think

As shown in Table 11, children' responses regarding resources that facilitate understanding, interpretation, planning, imagination, and critical thinking reveal generally positive perceptions. The overall composite means of 4.37 (SD = 0.94) suggests a favourable evaluation of key cognitive and intellectual support facilities, namely libraries and computers. Both the library (M = 4.33) and computers (M = 4.18) were rated as readily available, with satisfaction levels slightly lower, particularly for computers (M = 3.80), suggesting potential gaps in quality or access. Notably, children attributed high importance to both resources, with importance mean ratings of

4.90 for the library and 4.87 for computers respectively, reflecting strong recognition of their role in supporting academic engagement, independent learning, and critical thinking.

These findings emphasise the value children place on intellectual resources and their relevance in fostering equitable learning opportunities. However, the slight variability between perceived availability and satisfaction, especially in relation to technology access, indicates a need to strengthen resource quality and accessibility to ensure that all learners are equally empowered to think creatively, interpret meaningfully, and plan effectively - key aspects of inclusive and transformative education.

Table 11. *Descriptive Statistics of Children's Responses on Resources Supporting Understanding, Interpretation, and Critical Thinking*

Descriptive Statistics					
Variables	**N**	**Min**	**Max**	**Mean**	**SD**
1. Availability Library	200	1.00	5.00	4.33	1.19
2. Satisfaction Library	200	1.00	5.00	4.18	1.18
3. Importance Library	200	1.00	5.00	4.90	.40
4.Availability Computers	200	1.00	5.00	4.18	1.06
5.SatisfactionComputers	200	1.00	5.00	3.80	1.24
6.ImportanceComputers	200	1.00	5.00	4.87	.58
Composite Mean				**4.37**	**0.94**

In alignment with the survey data, field observations indicate that most schools are equipped with computer labs, smartboards, and well-stocked libraries (**see Photographs 9 and 10**). The libraries offer a diverse collection of fiction and non-fiction books, providing children with valuable opportunities to enhance their planning and imaginative skills. However, in one of the schools, despite the presence of a library, a shortage of books was noted. This limitation restricts children's ability to develop creative thinking and problem-solving skills. Within the CA framework (Otto & Ziegler, 2006), studies such as Daly (2020), Hart & Brando (2018), and Peleg (2013), supports that while physical availability of resources is important, actual learning empowerment is also dependent on learning environments that promote student agency, imagination, and critical thinking. Schools must provide, not only resources, but also open pedagogical spaces where each student can prepare, imagine, and fully participate in his or her learning journey.

Photographs 10: School library



Photographs 11-Computer Laboratory



7. Resource - Religion and Identity

As shown in Table 12, children's responses indicate a strong and favourable perception of resources related to religious activities and identity. The composite means of 4.69 (SD = 0.60) reflects consistently high ratings across availability (M = 4.65), satisfaction (M = 4.59), and especially importance (M = 4.85) of religious resources and opportunities within the school context. The low standard deviations suggest a high level of agreement among children across different schools. These findings highlight that religious practices are not only well-supported in schools but are also perceived as integral to children's identity formation and well-being. The uniformly high ratings point to the value children place on spiritual expression and the role of religious inclusion in fostering a respectful and culturally responsive learning environment.

Table 12. *Descriptive Statistics of Children's Responses on Religious Activities and Identity Resources*

Descriptive Statistics					
Variables	**N**	**Min**	**Max**	**Mean**	**SD**
1. Availability Religious Activities	200	2.00	5.00	4.65	.65
2. Satisfaction Religious Activities	200	2.00	5.00	4.59	.66
3. Importance Religious Activities	200	1.00	5.00	4.85	.49

Composite Mean	**4.69**	**0.6**

Supporting the survey results, field data reveals that various religious activities are promoted in schools starting from morning prayers to evening prayers. Furthermore, Buddhism, being the state religion, is well embraced in most of the schools. Stupas, along with portraits of deities and religious figures, are commonly seen on classroom and school walls. Annual *Rimdro* (Rituals) and chorten consecration are also performed in schools for their well-being and to ward off evils and negativity. Morning and evening prayers are also promoted in schools. While Buddhist values are actively promoted, this does not imply that children of other faiths are excluded. For instance, Hindu rituals and festivals such as *Shiv Rati poojas* and *Diwali* are also performed and celebrated in schools, reflecting an inclusive environment that respects and acknowledges religious diversity and social inclusion. In this respect, CA posits that enabling spiritual expression supports children' agency and freedom, taking education beyond academics to include moral and cultural empowerment required for GESI initiatives (Hart & Brando, 2018; Otto & Ziegler, 2006; Sen, 1999).

Photographs 12-Religious Activities





Shiv Rati Pooja

Diwali-Tika Ceremony by a local leader

Shel Roti

Photographs 13: Morning and Evening Prayers

8. Resource - Shelter and Environment

As presented in Table 13, children's responses reveal a broadly favourable evaluation of school infrastructure and environmental conditions, with a composite mean of 4.41 (SD = 0.86). High mean ratings across variables related to the availability and importance of adequate school built-up area (M = 4.14; M = 4.76), classroom space (M = 4.42; M = 4.91), desks and benches (M = 4.32; M = 4.82), and electricity (M = 4.34; M = 4.81) reflect that children recognise these resources as vital for a conducive learning environment. Satisfaction ratings, although slightly lower, particularly for built-up area (M = 3.84) and seating furniture (M = 3.95) - indicate that while the infrastructure exists, its quality or adequacy may not fully meet children's expectations. In this context, Dorji (2023) highlights that poorly maintained classrooms, crowded spaces, and limited infrastructure impede academic engagement and contribute to increased stress, discomfort, and social exclusion. This reinforces the need for sufficient space, well-lit classrooms, and enough desks and benches, features that ensures comfort, dignity, and an equitable learning environment for all children (MoE, 2014; MoE, 2022).

Overall, the findings suggest that schools have established the foundational physical infrastructure necessary for effective teaching and learning. However, the gap between availability/importance and satisfaction highlights areas where resource improvement is needed to enhance comfort, engagement, and academic outcomes. These insights point to the essential role that well-maintained, adequately equipped, and environmentally supportive school settings play in advancing inclusive and equitable education.

Table 13. *Descriptive Statistics of Children's Responses on Shelter and Environmental Resources*

Descriptive Statistics					
Variables	***N***	***Min***	***Max***	***Mean***	***SD***
1. Availability Adequate school built-up area	200	1.00	5.00	4.14	.97
2. Satisfaction Adequate school built-up area	200	1.00	5.00	3.84	1.18
3. Importance Adequate school built-up area	200	1.00	5.00	4.76	.71
4. Availability Adequate space for classrooms	200	1.00	5.00	4.42	.85
5. Satisfaction Adequate space for classrooms	200	1.00	5.00	4.22	1.00
6. Importance Adequate space for classrooms	200	1.00	5.00	4.91	.39
7. Availability Adequate number of classrooms	200	2.00	5.00	4.46	.78
8. Satisfaction Adequate number of classrooms	200	1.00	5.00	4.22	1.01

9. Importance Adequate number of classrooms	200	1.00	5.00	4.89	.44
10. Availability Adequate number of desks and benches for students	200	1.00	5.00	4.32	.90
11. Satisfaction Adequate number of desks and benches for students	200	1.00	5.00	3.95	1.13
12. Importance Adequate number of desks and benches for students	200	1.00	5.00	4.82	.65
13. Availability Electricity	200	.00	5.00	4.34	1.02
14. Satisfaction Electricity	200	.00	5.00	4.10	1.16
15. Importance Electricity	200	.00	5.00	4.81	.73
Composite Mean				**4.41**	**0.86**

Consistent with the survey findings, field data including photographs reveal that the school has well-developed infrastructure, including classrooms equipped with adequate chairs and tables as indicated below:

Photographs 12: Classrooms

However, satisfaction scores seem slightly lower. In this regard, CA views shelter as more than a physical need. According to studies, it is a key freedom that supports growth, play, health, and security (Peleg, 2013; Nussbaum, 2003; Broderick, 2018). Based on this understanding, it can be concluded that investment in child-centered, gender-sensitive, and inclusively constructed environments is essential to enhancing children's educational experience.

9. Resource - Mental Well-being

Children's responses regarding the availability, satisfaction, and perceived importance of grievance mechanisms as a proxy for institutional support for mental well-being, reflect an overwhelmingly positive perception (see Table 14). The composite means of 4.57 (SD = 0.80) suggests a strong consensus among children on the relevance and value of structured channels through which grievances and concerns can be addressed. Ratings for importance (M = 4.83) and availability (M = 4.54) are particularly high, indicating widespread recognition of the role

such mechanisms play in fostering psychological safety and emotional well-being within the school environment. Although satisfaction is slightly lower (M = 4.35), it still reflects a favourable appraisal of how well these systems are functioning in practice.

These findings highlight a well-implemented grievance mechanism not only supports children's emotional and psychological needs but also contributes to an inclusive, responsive, and safe school culture. Nevertheless, the marginally lower satisfaction score may suggest the need for further strengthening the effectiveness, accessibility, and responsiveness of such mechanisms.

Table 14. *Descriptive Statistics of Children's' Responses on Mental Well-being Resources*

Descriptive Statistics					
Variables	**N**	**Min**	**Max**	**Mean**	**SD**
1. Availability Grievance Mechanism	200	1.00	5.00	4.54	.93
2. Satisfaction Grievance Mechanism	200	1.00	5.00	4.35	.98
3. Importance Grievance Mechanism	200	1.00	5.00	4.83	.51
Composite Mean				**4.57**	**0.80**

Survey data reveals a positive perception regarding the availability, importance, and satisfaction with grievance mechanisms in schools. Field observations support this, indicating that schools offer varieties of mental health services such as counselling services, mentor-mentee programmes, and voluntary SEMSO contributions to promote children' mental well-being. Additionally, schools have initiated parent-school partnership programmes to enhance support for school activities. However, teachers reported receiving limited support from parents, indicating a gap between parental involvement and school expectations. In another school, interactions with the school principals revealed the establishment of grievance mechanisms such as a Discipline Committee, Redressal Committee, and a Parent and Public Involvement Committee. According to them, these mechanisms are established to address children's personal and academic concerns effectively, with the overarching goal of promoting children' mental well-being.

The presence of these grievance mechanisms aligns with literature such as (Chiappero-Martinetti et al., 2021; Esteban, 2022; NCWC, 2020;) that emphasises mental well-being as a core skill that requires structural support and cultural change. The findings suggest that all the five schools have this structural support in place to ensure children's emotional well-being. Having these systematic mechanisms in place will ultimately enable children's well-being achievement.

10. Resource - Social Relations

Children's perceptions of social relations as resources in schools, particularly parent-teacher meetings and child clubs are generally favourable, though they reveal a marked inconsistency in the accessibility and perceived value of different support mechanisms (see Table 15). The composite means of 4.17 (SD = 1.01) indicates an overall positive perception; however, the disaggregated results highlight critical contrasts. For example, parent-teacher meetings

received high ratings across all dimensions: availability (M = 4.79), satisfaction (M = 4.70), and importance (M = 4.93), suggesting their recognised significance as a formal structure that strengthens school-home communication and supports school children's development. Conversely, the relatively low ratings for child clubs, particularly in availability (M = 3.18) and satisfaction (M = 3.09), suggest that opportunities for children-led peer engagement and participatory platforms are less established or underutilised. Despite this, children assigned high importance to child clubs (M = 4.35), reflecting a strong desire for inclusive, student-driven spaces that promote voice, agency, and social connectedness.

Overall, while formal institutional mechanisms for parent engagement are well-developed and positively perceived, the findings point to an urgent need to enhance children-centred platforms for fostering peer interaction and leadership. Strengthening these aspects of school life may enhance children's sense of belonging, social development, and democratic participation.

Table 15. *Descriptive Statistics of Children's Responses on Social Relations*

Descriptive Statistics					
Variables	**N**	**Min**	**Max**	**Mean**	**SD**
1. Availability Parents Teachers Meeting	200	2.00	5.00	4.79	.52
2. Satisfaction Parents Teachers Meeting	200	2.00	5.00	4.70	.63
3. Importance Parents Teachers Meeting	200	2.00	5.00	4.93	.32
4. Availability Child Club	200	.00	5.00	3.18	1.75
5. Satisfaction Child Club	200	.00	5.00	3.09	1.61
6. Importance Child Club	200	.00	5.00	4.35	1.26
Composite Mean				**4.17**	**1.01**

One on one informal conversation with teachers' data reveals that the school organises Parent-Teacher Meetings (PTM) twice a year to discuss children's academic progress, the academic way forward, disciplinary issues, school children's well-being, and school rules, regulations, and policies. However, these teachers noted that the meetings are not limited to semester or year-end PTM, class and subject teachers can conduct meetings when needed.

In one school, considering the policy of whole school approach, all school children are involved in scouting and mentor mentee activities. However, this is not the case with the rest of the schools, which offers a significant number of clubs including Tarayana, Upshift, Cultural, Home Science, Literary, Democracy, Peer Helper, Beautification, and Taekwondo clubs, primarily catering to upper grades children while children from Pre-Primary to Grade VI participate in Scouting. This is in contrast to quantitative findings, which showed a low score of availability and satisfaction. Informal conversation with principals and teachers revealed that some of these clubs do not seem to be well established, which negatively affects their functionalities. Considering the vital role clubs play in fostering children's social relations, physical and mental well-being, the study emphasises the need to institutionalise child-led spaces that are inclusive, accessible, and age-responsive. This is in line with studies (Peleg, 2013; Esteban, 2022; UNICEF, 2024) and national policy (NCWC, 2020), which highlights club activities as important

to affirm children's agency, develop emotional resilience, and sustain social relations between children.

11. Resource - Autonomy

Children's responses concerning their autonomy and freedom from economic or non-economic exploitation, particularly in relation to having adequate free time, reveal a moderately positive outlook (see Table 16). The composite means of 4.15 (SD = 1.14) indicates a general sense of availability and importance attached to this dimension, though with some variability in individual experiences. Free time was rated fairly high in availability (M = 4.07) and satisfaction (M = 3.86), while its importance received a notably higher score (M = 4.54), suggesting that children strongly value unstructured time for rest, recreation, or personal interests.

The slightly lower satisfaction score compared to importance implies that children may not always feel they have sufficient or meaningful free time, possibly due to academic pressures or institutional routines. These findings suggest that while schools appear to acknowledge the importance of free time in principle, practical implementation may lag behind children's expectations.

Overall, this finding highlights the need to create balanced schedules and provide structured autonomy that respects children's time, supporting their mental well-being, creativity, and personal development.

Table 16. *Descriptive Statistics of Children's Responses on Autonomy and Freedom from Exploitation Resources*

Descriptive Statistics					
Variables	**N**	**Min**	**Max**	**Mean**	**SD**
1. Availability Free Time	200	1.00	5.00	4.07	1.17
2. Satisfaction Free Time	200	1.00	5.00	3.86	1.29
3. Importance Free Time	200	1.00	5.00	4.54	.98
Composite Mean				**4.15**	**1.14**

Schools are also given free time to attend exhibitions organised by the neighbouring schools. For example, one teacher noted that they were recently invited to a science exhibition. However, both teachers and children reported that the lack of a school bus limits their ability to attend such events or organise subject-related field trips. While children are encouraged and granted permission to participate in these learning opportunities, the absence of transportation prevents them from fully pursuing such aspirations.

In one school, border children are given 100 minutes of free time every day. During this time, children have the autonomy to do their preferred activities, however, the teacher noted that they are barred from going out of the school campus. By allowing children to make independent choices, notably through the provision of free time, the schools have tried to emphasise autonomy as a significant educational goal. However, mobility limitations and transport inaccessibility undermine this practice of autonomy.

These findings reflect a generic systematic and institutional gap, and this, in turn, limits children's ability to fully utilise their capabilities Scholars including Esteban (2022) and Peleg (2013) suggest autonomy as a rights-entitlement requirement, with emphasis on trust, responsiveness, and respect for children's agency. Thus, while the schools recognise the value of autonomy, making it a reality requires redesigning school organization and investment in mobility and choice, so that children are empowered.

12. **Resource - Participation**

Children's responses on the availability, satisfaction, and perceived importance of extracurricular activities, a capability of participation, reflect a generally favourable view (see Table 17).

The composite means of 4.42 (SD = 0.90) reflects strong agreement on the availability, satisfaction, and importance of opportunities that enable children to participate actively beyond the classroom setting. Availability (M = 4.36) and satisfaction (M = 4.12) ratings were notably high, and the importance of extracurricular activities was rated even higher (M = 4.80), suggesting that children deeply value such platforms for engagement, growth, and expression.

The slightly lower satisfaction compared to perceived importance suggests potential gaps in the diversity, frequency, or accessibility of these activities. Nonetheless, the overall data show that schools are largely supportive of children's participation, which is crucial for fostering confidence, leadership, and inclusion.

These findings suggest a favourable school climate that encourages school children's involvement, although further enhancements may be needed to fully align experiences with expectations.

Table 17. *Descriptive Statistics of Children's Responses on Participation and Mobility*

Descriptive Statistics					
Variables	**N**	**Min**	**Max**	**Mean**	**SD**
1. Availability Extracurricular activities	200	1.00	5.00	4.36	1.09
2. Satisfaction Extracurricular activities	200	.00	5.00	4.12	1.09
3. Importance Extracurricular activities	200	2.00	5.00	4.80	.52
Composite Mean				**4.42**	**0.9**

Furthermore, field data reports that varied extracurricular activities are made accessible to school children comprising games and sports, literary and others. Clubs are held once every week after school hours for a period of an hour under the guidance of the teachers. Children are given the freedom to choose their choice of extracurricular activities considering their interest. However, in one of the schools, the club choices are catered considering the two levels of schools, primary and secondary. Clubs such as Tarayana, Upshift, Cultural, Home Science, Literary, Democracy, Peer Helper, Beautification, and Taekwondo are catered primarily to upper-grade children. Meanwhile, children from PP to Grade VI are involved in Scouting. These

clubs not only foster children's participation and mobility but also promote gender equality and social inclusion. Despite this stratification, observations during the session indicated that both male and female children are involved equally, suggesting inclusive access to opportunities. This ability to be able to participate in their choice of activities is considered as one of the elementary freedoms that children have reason to value.

This aligns closely with the broader policy and literature (Zaremba et al., 2024; NCWC, 2020; MoESD, 2024), which highlight inclusive participation as a central element of holistic and democratic education. Bhutan's Gross National Happiness (GNH) policy resonates with these objectives, promoting values of equity, well-being, and inclusivity. Nevertheless, as Zaremba et al. (2024) point out, practical barriers such as planning inefficiencies, lack of age-appropriate programming, and logistical constraints (e.g., transport) need to be addressed to fully realise inclusive satisfaction.

The analysis thus validates that while schools are making commendable efforts to engage children in civic and creative activities, a more deliberate, inclusive, and diversified participation model is essential. The initiatives undertaken by the schools align with Vain (2025) who emphasises the importance of embedding equal participation in school governance, curriculum planning, and everyday interactions. This ensures that all children regardless of age, gender, or background are equally empowered to participate meaningfully in school life, thereby enhancing their agency and overall well-being.

The following photographs support inclusive and equitable access to children's participation in school activities:

Photographs 14: Extracurricular Activities

STUDENTS' PERCEIVED LEVELS OF THE CAPABILITY INDICATORS

This section presents the analysis of school children's perceived levels of capability indicators, based on data collected from five schools in Samtse Dzongkhag. The capability indicators were analysed using a 0–10 scale across 16 capabilities, combining dimensions of Well-being and Agency Freedom and Achievement.

1. Love, Care and Respect

1.1 Love for

Table 1.1 shows how students rated their feelings of love toward different people in their lives such as their love for parents, teachers, elders, juniors, and friends cross four areas: the freedom to love (*Wellbeing Freedom*), actually feeling that love (*Wellbeing Achievement*), the freedom to choose whom to love (*Agency Freedom*), and having chosen to love them (*Agency Achievement*).

Across all metrics, *love for parents* consistently recorded the highest mean scores: 9.71 (*Wellbeing Freedom*), 9.75 (*Wellbeing Achievement*), 9.74 (*Agency Freedom*), and 9.77 (*Agency Achievement*). In contrast, the lowest scores were found for *love for juniors*: 8.88 in *Wellbeing Achievement* and 8.76 in *Agency Achievement*, suggesting slightly less perceived autonomy and fulfilment in expressing love toward younger peers.

Overall, the mean for *Wellbeing Freedom* (46.63) and *Wellbeing Achievement* (46.06) indicates that students largely feel both free and able to express love toward parents, teachers, elders, juniors, and friends. Interestingly, *Agency Freedom* (46.73) was slightly higher than *Wellbeing Freedom*, suggesting students feel empowered to choose whom they love. However, *Agency Achievement* (45.88) was marginally lower, which could point to minor gaps between choice and action in some relationships.From a GESI and wellbeing perspective, these findings point to strong relational bonds and emotional security, especially within family contexts, which are crucial for nurturing students' mental health, resilience, and social inclusion. However, the relatively lower scores for relationships with juniors may signal a need to foster more inclusive, respectful peer relationships across age groups, possibly through mentorship programs, buddy systems, or cooperative learning activities that encourage inter-age empathy and support.

Table 1.1:

Descriptive analysis of sub domain Love For_ for the capability Love, Care, and Respect

Items/Scale (10)	N	Wellbeing Freedom (I am able to)=Mean	Wellbeing Achievement (Have) =Mean	Agency Freedom (Choose to)=Maen	Agency Achievement (have chosen to)=Mean
I ….love (for) my parents.	200	9.71	9.75	9.74	9.77
I …. love (for) my teachers	200	9.27	9.31	9.31	9.24

I….love my (for) elders.	200	9.07	9.02	9.17	9.01
I….love my (for) juniors.	200	9.23	8.88	9.22	8.76
I….love my (for) friends.	200	9.35	9.10	9.29	9.10
Valid N (listwise)	200	46.63	46.06	46.73	45.88

Within the framework of CA, love, care, and respect are foundational values in children's development. Field data corroborated this with examples such as school children organising teacher's birthday celebrations to show their mutual love, care and respect. These practices not only reflect their genuine affection but also the social relations in an educational setting. Such expressions of love and care align with Domínguez-Serrano et al. (2018), who argue that children exposed to non-stereotyped care models, learn to express emotions beyond classic gendered expectations, fostering emotional resilience, empathy, and inclusive interaction. The finding, thus, supports CA's assertion that relational capabilities such as feeling loved, cared, and respected are integral to fostering inclusive and equitable school communities and promoting holistic child development.

1.2 Love by

Table 1.2 presents students' ratings of Love by from different people in their lives such as parents, teachers, elders, juniors, and friends across four dimensions: *Wellbeing Freedom* (feeling free to receive love), *Wellbeing Achievement* (actually experiencing that love), *Agency Freedom* (having the choice to receive love from others), and *Agency Achievement* (having received love from those they choose). Ratings were given on a 10-point scale, with responses from 200 students.

The highest scores were for love by parents, particularly in *Wellbeing Freedom* (9.77) and *Agency Achievement* (9.54). This suggests that students feel both free and successful in receiving love from their parents. On the other hand, the lowest scores were for love by juniors (8.31) in *Wellbeing Achievement* and (8.72) in *Agency Freedom*, indicating that students perceive less fulfilment and autonomy in receiving love from younger peers.

Overall, *Wellbeing Freedom* had a mean score of 45.97, higher than *Wellbeing Achievement* (43.62), suggesting that while students feel they have the opportunity to be loved, the depth or consistency of that love may be lower in practice. For *Agency*, the mean score for *Freedom* (44.77) was slightly lower than *Achievement* (45.11), showing that when students expect to receive love from certain individuals, they generally do. These results assert that schools are successful in creating nurturing and supportive school environments which likely contributed to higher agency achievement.

From a GESI and wellbeing perspective, these results suggest that school strong parental affection plays a vital role in students' sense of emotional security and belonging. However, the comparatively lower scores for juniors indicate that peer relationships especially across age groups may be less nurturing. Schools could address this by fostering inter-age friendships through peer mentoring, cooperative activities, and cross-age leadership opportunities to ensure that care and connection extend across all student groups.

Table 1.2:

Descriptive analysis of sub domain Love By_ for the capability Love, Care, and Respect

Items/Scale (10)	N	Wellbeing Freedom (I am able to) =Mean	Wellbeing Achievement (Have) =Mean	Agency Freedom (Choose to) =Mean	Agency Achievement (have chosen to) =Mean
I …. love (for) my parents.	200	9.77	9.31	9.31	9.54
I …. love (for) my teachers	200	9.44	8.94	9.06	8.95
I…. love my (for) elders.	200	9.01	8.41	8.82	8.91
I…. love my (for) juniors.	200	8.78	8.31	8.72	8.87
I…. love my (for) friends.	200	8.97	8.65	8.86	8.84
Valid N (listwise)	200	45.97	43.62	44.77	45.11

In this line, CA asserts the importance of treating children with love, care, and respect. Such values were evident in some schools where teachers personally accompanied sick students to hospitals in the absence of school transportation, ensuring that their health needs were met. Similarly, certain schools-initiated support programmes to assist economically disadvantaged school children through the provision of school supplies and scholarships. The existence of these practices reflects the genuine care and commitment of teachers toward the well-being of their students. This corroborates Guo et al. 's (2020) and Sacco's (2024) findings that illustrate that teacher support rooted in care, respect and compassion enhances resilience and helps adolescents better manage negative emotions.

These results also highlight the importance of emotional and social support in advancing the agency and well-being of children. However, disparities particularly in Peljorling HSS and teacher descriptions of declining respect from students reveal inconsistencies between attitudinal descriptions and concrete behaviors. This asserts the need for values education and planned interventions to facilitate relational abilities. As promoted by Nussbaum (2011) and Guo et al. (2020), these are critical in developing dignity, resilience, and equitable, inclusive school cultures on GESI foundations.

1.3 Care For

Table 1.3 presents students' self-ratings of the care they provide to parents, teachers, elders, juniors, and friends across four dimensions: *Wellbeing Freedom* (feeling free to give care), *Wellbeing Achievement* (actually giving care), *Agency Freedom* (choosing to give care), and *Agency Achievement* (having given care to those they chose). Ratings were given on a 10-point scale, with responses from 200 students.

The highest scores were for care provided to parents, particularly in *Agency Freedom* (9.61) and *Wellbeing Freedom* (9.42), suggesting that students feel both free and empowered to care for their parents and actively choose to do so. In contrast, the lowest scores were for care

provided to juniors, especially in *Agency Achievement* (8.37) and *Wellbeing Achievement* (8.76), indicating that students perceive themselves as providing less care to younger peers compared to other groups.

Overall, *Wellbeing Freedom* had a mean of 46.60 and *Wellbeing Achievement* 45.30, suggesting that while students feel open and able to provide care, their actual practice is slightly lower. Similarly, *Agency Freedom* (45.74) was higher than *Agency Achievement* (44.78), reflecting a small gap between the intention or choice to provide care and acting on that choice in reality.

From a GESI and wellbeing perspective, these findings suggest that students prioritise caring for family members especially parents over peers, particularly younger ones. While strong familial care is an important foundation for empathy and social responsibility, the relatively lower scores for juniors point to opportunities for strengthening cross-age support and mentorship in schools. Additionally, although schools do provide freedom for children to express their love for anyone, structured programs such as buddy systems, leadership roles for older students, and inter-age collaborative activities could help foster a culture of care that extends across all age groups, contributing to social inclusion and mutual respect.

Table 1.3

Descriptive analysis of sub domain Care For_ for the capability Love, Care, and Respect

Items/Scale (10)	N	Wellbeing Freedom (I am able to) =Mean	Wellbeing Achievement (Have) =Mean	Agency Freedom (Choose to) =Mean	Agency Achievement (have chosen to) =Mean
I... care/cared for my Parents	200	9.42	9.38	9.61	9.23
I... care/cared for my teachers	200	9.32	9.07	9.29	9.23
I... care/cared for my elders	200	9.26	9.08	9.02	8.84
I... care/cared for my Juniors	200	9.31	8.76	9.14	8.37
I... care/cared for my friends	200	9.30	9.02	8.69	9.12
Valid N (listwise)	200	46.60	45.30	45.74	44.78

1.4 Care By

Table 1. 4 presents students' ratings of the care they receive from parents, teachers, elders, juniors, and friends across four dimensions: *Wellbeing Freedom* (feeling free to receive care), *Wellbeing Achievement* (actually experiencing that care), *Agency Freedom* (having the choice to receive care from others), and *Agency Achievement* (having received care from those they choose). Ratings were on a 10-point scale, with 200 students participating.

The highest scores were for care received from parents, with 9.63 in *Wellbeing Freedom* and 9.71 in *Agency Achievement*. This suggests that students not only feel free to receive care from their parents but also consistently experience it when they choose to. The lowest scores were for care received from juniors (8.18) in *Wellbeing Achievement* and (8.53) in *Agency Freedom*, indicating that students perceive less fulfilment and autonomy in receiving care from younger peers.

Overall, *Wellbeing Freedom* had a mean of 45.80, slightly higher than *Wellbeing Achievement* (44.25), suggesting that although students generally feel able to receive care, the actual experience is somewhat lower. Similarly, *Agency Freedom* (44.65) was lower than *Agency Achievement* (45.43), indicating that when students expect to receive care from certain individuals, they often do.

From a GESI and wellbeing perspective, the results emphasise the critical role of parental care in fostering emotional security, resilience, and belonging. Strong care from teachers also supports positive school relationships, supporting the case made by Nussbaum (2011) that human dignity is beyond material access and needs to include emotional and social care as at the heart of a life of value. However, the relatively lower scores for juniors suggest that peer-to-peer care especially across age groups may be less developed. Schools could address this through mentorship programs, peer support initiatives, and inclusive activities that encourage empathy, mutual responsibility, and care across different student cohorts.

Table 1.4

Descriptive analysis of sub domain Care By_ for the capability Love, Care, and Respect

Items/Scale (10)	N	Wellbeing Freedom (I am able to) =Mean	Wellbeing Achievement (Have) =Mean	Agency Freedom (Choose to) =Mean	Agency Achievement (have chosen to) =Mean
My Parents…care (for) me.	200	9.63	9.60	9.47	9.71
My teachers…care (for) me.	200	9.33	9.31	9.17	9.36
My elders…care (for) me.	200	9.11	8.79	8.74	8.84
My juniors…care (for) me.	200	8.66	8.18	8.53	8.71
My friends…care (for) me.	200	9.08	8.37	8.74	8.81
Valid N (listwise)	200	45.80	44.25	44.65	45.43

1.5 Respect For

As shown in Table 1.5, the findings reveal that students reported very high levels of respect for their parents, teachers, elders, juniors, and friends across all four dimensions: well-being freedom (their ability to show respect), well-being achievement (actually showing

respect), agency freedom (having the choice to show respect), and agency achievement (having chosen to do so).

Respect for parents emerged as the highest across all measures, with *well-being freedom* scoring 9.71 and *agency freedom* at 9.44. Respect for teachers followed closely, with *well-being freedom* at 9.59 and *agency freedom* at 9.43.

Respect for elders scored relatively lower in *well-being achievement* (7.70), suggesting that while students feel capable of showing respect (9.29 in well-being freedom), their actual expression of it may be less frequent in practice.

Respect for friends showed the lowest in *agency achievement* (8.58), indicating slightly less consistency in actively choosing to demonstrate respect toward peers.

Overall, the average total scores of 47.01 for well-being freedom and 46.10 for agency freedom suggest that students not only value respect but largely exercise it in their relationships, with only small variations depending on the group (parents, teachers, elders, juniors, or friends). These trends assure that most of the children report positive values according to GESI principles. However, qualitative teacher discussion data reveal a disparity between these attitudinal self-reports and every day observed behaviors, namely declining respect for teachers. The contrast underscores the necessity of values reinforcement via formal programmes such as values education and relational interventions that heighten respect within school communities. To this end, Guo et al. (2020) demonstrate that compassionate teacher–student relationships not only enhance respectfulness but are also critical to the emotional well-being of at-risk adolescents, making it worth the effort to make conscious efforts at building respectful school climates.

Table 1.5

Descriptive analysis of sub domain Respect For_ for the capability Love, Care, and Respect

Items/Scale (10)	N	Wellbeing Freedom (I am able to) =Mean	Wellbeing Achievement (Have) =Mean	Agency Freedom (Choose to) =Mean	Agency Achievement (have chosen to) =Mean
I…respect (for) my parents.	200	9.71	9.57	9.44	9.42
I…respect (for) my teachers	200	9.59	9.40	9.43	9.41
I…respect (for) my elders.	200	9.29	7.70	9.10	9.22
I…respect (for) my juniors.	200	9.12	9.01	9.01	8.88
I…respect (for) my friends	200	9.32	8.84	9.13	8.58
Valid N (listwise)	200	47.01	44.52	46.10	45.50

1.6 Respect By

As shown in Table 1.6, students reported the highest respect from parents, with *Wellbeing Freedom* (9.45) and *Agency Freedom* (9.47) scoring the highest among all categories. In contrast, the lowest respect was reported from friends, particularly in *Agency Freedom* (8.43), indicating that students feel the least autonomy or choice in the respect they receive from their peers.

Overall, the mean scores across all groups were 45.50 for *Wellbeing Freedom*, 44.18 for *Wellbeing Achievement*, 44.16 for *Agency Freedom*, and 44.65 for *Agency Achievement*. These results suggest that while students generally feel respected and have some control over these relationships, parental respect remains the strongest influence on their sense of dignity and agency, whereas peer respect may be less consistent or within their control. This pattern reflects Domínguez-Serrano et al. (2018), who emphasise that respecting children's voice, autonomy, and growing abilities is key to building their agency and well-being. Respect from parents is often steady and unconditional, helping strengthen children's confidence and sense of dignity. On the other hand, peer respect could be dependent on social dynamics and group acceptance, making it less predictable and harder for children to control. To address this gap, schools need to model and encourage respectful behaviour among students so that respect is based on shared values rather than changing social hierarchies.

Table 1.6

Descriptive analysis of sub domain Respect By_ for the capability Love, Care, and Respect

Items/Scale (10)	N	Wellbeing Freedom (I am able to) =Mean	Wellbeing Achievement (Have) =Mean	Agency Freedom (Choose to) =Mean	Agency Achievement (have chosen to) =Mean
My parents… respect (for) me.	200	9.45	9.12	9.47	9.28
My teachers… respect (for) me.	200	9.29	8.91	8.95	9.04
My elders… respect (for) me.	200	8.98	8.61	8.54	8.61
My juniors… respect (for) me.	200	8.94	8.75	8.78	8.88
My friends… respect (for) me.	200	8.83	8.80	8.43	8.85
Valid N (listwise)	200	45.50	44.18	44.16	44.65

2. Education

2.1 Reading, Writing, and Learning

As reflected in table 2.1, mean scores for the *Reading, Writing, and Learning* subdomain are consistently high across all four dimensions: *Wellbeing Freedom*, *Wellbeing Achievement*, *Agency Freedom*, and *Agency Achievement* with values ranging from 8.98 to 9.61.

The highest score was for *"I… learn/learned from my teachers, friends, and parents"* under Agency Achievement (mean = 9.61), suggesting that students not only have opportunities to learn from various sources but actively choose to do so while writing skills showed particularly strong Agency Freedom (mean = 9.43) and Agency Achievement (mean = 9.39), indicating that students feel confident in and motivated to engage in age-appropriate writing.

Reading skills scored slightly lower than writing and learning, with the lowest mean in this subdomain being Wellbeing Freedom for reading (mean = 8.98), though still high, suggesting that while students are able to read at their level, other skills may be perceived as slightly stronger. Likewise, homework completion also scored highly across dimensions, particularly in Agency Achievement (mean = 9.26), reflecting strong personal responsibility and choice in fulfilling academic tasks.

Overall, the total mean scores (Wellbeing Freedom = 36.75, Wellbeing Achievement = 36.70, Agency Freedom = 36.96, Agency Achievement = 37.37) indicate that students possess both the capacity (*freedom*) and the practice (*achievement*) in reading, writing, and learning, with agency-related measures being marginally stronger than wellbeing measures. This suggests a learning environment that fosters self-motivation and active engagement in education. While teachers and principals, in informal conversations, stated that there are often disparities that stem from uneven resource availability and instructional support, this does not seem to have affected students' overall wellbeing and agency achievement.

Table 2.1: *Descriptive analysis of sub domain Reading, Writing, and Learning for the capability Education*

Reading, Writing, and Learning /Scale (10)	**N**	**Wellbeing Freedom (I am able to) = Mean**	**Wellbeing Achievement (Have) =Mean**	**Agency Freedom (Choose to) =Mean**	**Agency Achievement (have chosen to) =Mean**
I…. read according to my age and grade level.	200	8.98	9.32	9.03	9.12
I…. write/written according to my age and grade level.	200	9.03	9.20	9.43	9.39
I…. learn/learned from my teachers, friends, and parents.	200	9.41	9.18	9.34	9.61
I…. complete/ completed my homework.	200	9.33	9.00	9.17	9.26
Valid N (listwise)	200	36.75	36.70	36.96	37.37

2.2 Success

As shown in table 2.2, the *Success* sub domain under education capability recorded high mean scores across all four dimensions: *Wellbeing Freedom*, *Wellbeing Achievement*, *Agency Freedom*, and *Agency Achievement* ranging from 8.45 to 9.70.

The highest score was observed for *"I… attend/attended school every day"* under Agency Achievement (mean = 9.70), reflecting students' strong self-driven commitment to regular school attendance. This was closely followed by Wellbeing Freedom (mean = 9.65) for the same item, indicating that students feel both capable of and motivated to maintain attendance.

Grade transition also scored highly, particularly in Wellbeing Freedom (mean = 9.55) and Agency Achievement (mean = 9.55), suggesting smooth progression and a strong sense of capability in advancing academically.

Concentration on studies and *building good habits* both achieved strong agency-related scores (above 9.27), highlighting students' active choice to focus on learning and cultivate positive behaviors.

Lowest scores appeared for *"I… participate/participated in outdoor games"*, especially under Wellbeing Achievement (mean = 8.45), suggesting that while academic engagement is strong, physical activity participation is somewhat lower compared to other success indicators.

Overall, the total mean scores for 7 items for (Wellbeing Freedom = 64.03, Wellbeing Achievement = 62.77, Agency Freedom = 64.93, Agency Achievement = 65.48) indicate that students report a high level of both capacity and practice in achieving educational success, with agency measures slightly surpassing wellbeing measures. This suggests that students are not only performing academically but also exercising agency by engaging in meaningful learning experiences, reflecting Walker's (2005) view that education as an indicator of capacity goes beyond achievement to include children's sense of agency, personal growth, and the ability to pursue lives they have reason to value. Further, field data suggests that these could be a result of numerous initiatives organised by individual schools. For instance, Tashithang MSS initiated several structured programmes such as "Scaffolding Sunday" for Grades 6–10, "Wisdom Wisdom" for Grade 6, and "Friday Focus," a one-hour session dedicated to clarifying doubts for students from Grades 6-10. Peljorling HSS and Yoseltse HSS reported establishing study centres specifically for children from army backgrounds, implemented monitored study hours for students living in rental homes, organised Sunday study sessions, mentoring programmes both within and outside the school, along with monthly tests to support learning. These programmes, alongside remedial classes, continuous assessments, excursions, and reading sessions, reflect an intent to nurture what Mohanasundaram and Chandrasekar (2014) describe as "inner capabilities," consistent with UNESCO's four pillars of education. However, the results suggest that while academic focus, attendance, and progression are strong, opportunities for improving engagement in outdoor games and co-curricular activities remain.

Table 2.2:

Descriptive analysis of sub domain Success for the capability Education

Success/Items/Scale (10)	N	Wellbeing Freedom (I am able to) =Mean	Wellbeing Achievement (Have) =Mean	Agency Freedom (Choose to) =Mean	Agency Achievement (have chosen to) =Mean
I…concentrate/concentrated on my studies.	200	9.14	9.22	9.38	9.48
I…participate/participated in classroom activities.	200	8.74	9.13	9.21	9.24
I…participate/participated in outdoor games.	200	8.55	8.45	8.76	8.78
I… attend/attended school every day.	200	9.65	8.98	9.54	9.70
I…transition/transitioned from one grade level to another.	200	9.55	8.89	9.39	9.55
I…study/studied hard.	200	9.22	8.94	9.18	9.46
I…build/built on good habits.	200	9.19	9.17	9.48	9.27
Valid N (listwise)	200	64.03	62.77	64.93	65.48

2.3 Future

The *Future* sub domain under education capability data shows high mean scores across all items related to students' perceptions of their education, ability to shape their future, and anticipated success (Table 2.3). Scores range mostly from about 8.9 to 9.56 on a 10-point scale, indicating strong positive outlooks.

Under Wellbeing Freedom (the ability to), *"Success in the Future"* received the highest mean (9.51), followed by *"Shaping the Future"* (9.43), and *"Education as Future"* (9.12), suggesting students feel confident about their capacity to achieve future success and influence their futures through education.

Similarly, Wellbeing Achievement (having achieved or possessed) scores are also high, with *"Success in the Future"* at 9.56, the highest in this dimension, indicating students feel they already have the foundations for future success.

For Agency Freedom (choosing to act), *"Education as Future"* scored the highest mean (9.54), showing students' strong sense of choice and motivation towards education as a pathway for their future.

In Agency Achievement (having chosen to act), scores are slightly lower but still high, with *"Shaping Future"* at 9.20 and *"Success in the Future"* at 9.25, indicating active engagement in actions they believe will shape and secure their future success.

Standard deviations range from approximately 1.15 to 1.96, reflecting some variability among students but generally consistent positive responses.

Overall, the data suggests that schools are creating supportive and nurturing learning environments that contribute to shaping students' futures, with students demonstrating a strong sense of both wellbeing (capability) and self-directed motivation (agency). They exhibit particularly high confidence in their ability to succeed and shape their futures, which is crucial for driving ongoing engagement and goal pursuit. However, it is important to note that while wellbeing freedom and agency freedom are higher than wellbeing achievement and agency achievement, there remains a gap between students' sense of freedom and autonomy in their educational journey and their actualization of these abilities in practice. This contrast highlights the need for continued efforts to bridge the gap between students' aspirations and their day-to-day realities, ensuring that they not only have the freedom to succeed but also the resources, support, and opportunities to fully achieve their goals.

Table 2.3:

Descriptive analysis of sub domain Future_ for the capability Education

Success/Items/Scale (10)	N	Wellbeing Freedom (I am able to) =Mean	Wellbeing Achievement (Have) =Mean	Agency Freedom (Choose to) =Mean	Agency Achievement (have chosen to) =Mean
Well-being Freedom Future Education as Future/Well-being Achievement Future Education as Future/Agency Freedom Future Education as Future/Agency Achievement Future Education as Future	200	9.12	9.05	9.54	8.94
Well-being Freedom Future Shaping Future/Well-being Achievement Future Shaping Future Education as Future/Agency Freedom Future Shaping Future/Agency	200	9.43	9.25	9.40	9.20

Achievement Future Shaping Future Well-being Freedom Future Success in the Future/Well-being Achievement Future Success in the Future/Agency Freedom Future Success in the Future/Agency Achievement Future Success in the Future	200	9.51	9.56	9.43	9.25
Valid N (Listwise)	200	28.06	27.86	28.5	27.39

Descriptive analysis of sub domain Future_ for the capability Education

Future/Scale 10 Points	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Well-being Freedom Future Education as Future	200	9.12	1.89
Well-being Freedom Future Shaping Future	200	9.43	1.33
Well-being Freedom Future Success in the Future	200	9.51	1.29
Well-being Achievement Future Education as Future	200	9.05	1.89
Well-being Achievement Future Shaping Future	200	9.25	1.59
Well-being Achievement Future Success in the Future	200	9.56	1.26
Agency Freedom Future Education as Future	200	9.54	1.26
Agency Freedom Future Shaping Future	200	9.40	1.32
Agency Freedom Future Success in the Future	200	9.43	1.15
Agency Achievement Future Education as Future	200	8.94	1.96
Agency Achievement Future Shaping Future	200	9.20	1.56
Agency Achievement Future Success in the Future	200	9.25	1.52
Valid N (listwise)	200		

3. Nutritional-Wellbeing

As shown in the table 3, for Nutritional Well-being capability, the highest mean score appears in Agency Achievement (have chosen to) for the item “I … satisfy my hunger with the meals I eat” (Mean = 9.51), suggesting that most students not only have meals that satisfy their hunger but also actively choose to do so. The lowest mean score appears in Wellbeing Achievement (have) for the item “I … eat snacks when I am hungry between meals” (Mean = 8.06), indicating that snacking between meals is less common or accessible for students compared to other nutritional practices. This reflects Gombert et al.’s (2017) caution that structural limitations in some poverty settings can restrict children’s access to additional food, thereby highlighting the need for schools to intervene in order to support children’s nutritional autonomy.

The overall means for 7 items for Wellbeing Freedom is 62.39 while for Wellbeing Achievement is 62.14. Similarly, for Agency Freedom is 62.52 and Agency Achievement is 63.04.

These consistently high overall mean scores indicate that, in general, students report strong nutritional well-being as they have both the capability (freedom) and the actual experience (achievement) to meet their dietary needs. Slightly higher scores for Agency Achievement suggest that students feel empowered to make active choices about their nutrition, not just passively receive what is available. The findings resonate strongly with the arguments in literature. As Gombert et al. (2017) and Venkatapuram (2011) emphasize, children’s nutritional well-being depends not only on food availability but also on their capacity to access and choose balanced meals in supportive environments. Field observations further illustrate this relationship, showing how visual illustrations of nutrition pyramids and healthy school lunches showcased around the school campus, help create environments where students are both aware of and able to exercise choice in their eating.

Table 3:

Descriptive analysis of for the capability Nutritional Well-being

Items/Scale (10)	N	Wellbeing Freedom (I am able to) =Mean	Wellbeing Achievement (Have) =Mean	Agency Freedom (Choose to) =Mean	Agency Achievement (have chosen to) =Mean
I…… (have) (1/2/3/4) meals in a day at home.	200	9.14	9.40	9.20	9.40
I ..... include protein in my diet (1/2/3/4) times in a week	200	8.30	9.12	8.85	9.04
I ..... include green vegetables and fruits in my diet (1/2/3/4) in a week.	200	9.20	9.29	8.99	9.09
I … satisfy/satisfy my hunger with the meals I eat.	200	9.45	9.19	9.32	9.51
I …… eat/eat snacks when I am hungry between meals.	200	8.54	8.06	8.63	8.50

I ……ask/ask for a second serving of food when I am hungry.	200	9.05	8.49	9.05	8.76
I…… (have) lunch before coming to school.	200	8.73	8.61	8.50	8.75
Valid N (listwise)	200	62.39	62.14	62.52	63.04

4. Aspiration

The *Aspiration* capability reflects students' thoughts, dreams, and discussions about their future goals and plans, with mean scores generally ranging from 7.74 to 9.51 across the four dimensions: *Wellbeing Freedom*, *Wellbeing Achievement*, *Agency Freedom*, and *Agency Achievement (Table 4)*.

The highest mean score is for *"I… dream/dreamt about my future"* under Agency Achievement (mean = 9.51), indicating that many students actively choose to dream about their futures and feel motivated by their aspirations.

Thinking about future goals and aspirations shows strong and consistent scores across all dimensions (means between 9.00 and 9.34), illustrating that students are reflective and intentional about their future directions.

The item *"I… envision/envisioned what I would like to be in the future"* shows a somewhat lower score for Wellbeing Freedom (mean = 7.74), suggesting that although students are thinking about their future selves, some may feel less able or confident in their capacity to envision their ideal future freely. However, the Wellbeing Achievement for this item is high (9.31), indicating that many students do feel they have made progress in this regard. This quantitative finding is supported by field data, which revealed the presence of display boards featuring school toppers. According to teachers, these visual displays were strategically used to motivate and inspire all students to strive toward their academic goals and personal aspirations. These findings resonate with Shneyder et al. (2021), who posit that aspirations are not only created by individual motivation but also by structural and cultural influences more broadly. Hart (2016) also points out that in order for aspirations to be translated into actual capacities and attainment, children's agency needs to be actively facilitated by schools.

Talking about future plans with parents and teachers also scored well across dimensions (around 8.66 to 9.10), reflecting engagement with supportive adults in shaping their aspirations.

Overall, the total mean scores (Wellbeing Freedom = 34.99, Wellbeing Achievement = 36.57, Agency Freedom = 36.69, Agency Achievement = 36.18) demonstrate that students are actively dreaming, thinking, envisioning, and discussing their futures. While most dimensions show high capability and engagement, the slightly lower wellbeing freedom in envisioning future selves suggests a possible area for support to help students feel more empowered to freely imagine their futures.

Table 4:
Descriptive analysis of for the capability Aspiration

Aspiration /Scale (10)	N	Wellbeing Freedom (I am able to) = Mean	Wellbeing Achievement (Have) =Mean	Agency Freedom (Choose to) =Mean	Agency Achievement (have chosen to) =Mean
…… dream/dreamt about my future.	200	9.36	9.17	9.22	9.51
I……. think/thought about my future goals and aspirations.	200	9.23	9.17	9.34	9.00
I……. envision/envisioned what I would like to be in the future.	200	7.74	9.31	9.03	8.67
I ……talk/talked about my future plans with my parents and teachers.	200	8.66	8.92	9.10	9.00
Valid N (listwise)	200	34.99	36.57	36.69	36.18

5. Physical Health

As depicted in Table 5, the *Physical Health* capability reflects students' engagement in physical activities, access to health facilities, environmental conditions, and sleep patterns, with mean scores ranging from 8.03 to 9.29 across the four wellbeing and agency dimensions.

The highest scores are observed in items related to *access to medical health facilities* and *living in a clean school environment*, with Wellbeing Freedom means of 9.29 and 9.14 respectively, and strong corresponding Agency Freedom and Agency Achievement scores (above 9.17). This suggests students feel both able to and actively choose to maintain health through these resources.

Participation in physical activities conducted by the school also scored highly in Wellbeing Freedom (9.13) and Agency Freedom (9.03), although the Achievement scores were somewhat lower (8.66 and 8.62), indicating room for improvement in consistent participation. This suggests that while students generally have the freedom and opportunity to engage in physical activities, they do not always translate this potential into regular practice. Field notes revealed that in some schools, children were using the assembly ground as a makeshift playground, reflecting limited access to proper sports facilities. In contrast, at Peljorling HSS and Yoeltse HSS, all sporting facilities were accessible; however, variations in participation may be due to differences in how sports events and activities were organized. These findings align with CA, which is concerned not just with the availability of physical health resources but also with children's actual freedom to realise well-being in facilitative settings and active engagement (Broderick &

Tengland, 2019; Till et al., 2021). Environmental factors such as quality of infrastructure, safety, provision of public spaces and individual circumstances also shape children's health capabilities (Broderick, 2018; Wells, n.d.). Therefore, in order to enhance their GESI indicators, schools must do more than allocate resources and instead actually work towards providing equal opportunities for all children to participate in physically healthy lifestyles.

The lowest scores are seen in *sleeping for at least 10 hours a day*, which means around 8.03 to 8.37 across dimensions, suggesting that adequate sleep may be a challenge for some students. This highlights an important area for health promotion.

Overall, the total mean scores (Wellbeing Freedom = 35.59, Wellbeing Achievement = 34.45, Agency Freedom = 35.57, Agency Achievement = 35.43) indicate that students generally perceive strong capacity and motivation to maintain good physical health, particularly in accessing health services and living in a clean environment. However, sleep habits may need additional attention to support optimal physical wellbeing.

Table 5:
Descriptive analysis of for the capability Physical Health

Physical Health /Scale (10)	**N**	**Wellbeing Freedom (I am able to) = Mean**	**Wellbeing Achievement (Have) =Mean**	**Agency Freedom (Choose to) =Mean**	**Agency Achievement (have chosen to) =Mean**
I .....participate/participated in physical activities that my school conducts.	200	9.13	8.66	9.03	8.62
I ……access/accessed medical health facilities, including first aid and health check-ups, at my school.	200	9.29	8.82	9.23	9.17
I…… live/lived in a clean environment in school.	200	9.14	8.85	9.23	9.27
I…. sleep/slept for at least 10 hours a day.	200	8.03	8.12	8.08	8.37
Valid N (listwise)	200	35.59	34.45	35.57	35.43

6. Bodily Integrity

As shown in Table 6, the *Bodily Integrity* capability reflects students' perceptions of safety, awareness of violence and rights, and freedom from bullying and abuse in home, school, and community settings. Mean scores are consistently high across all items and dimensions, ranging approximately from 8.47 to 9.58 on the 10-point scale.

Students reported feeling very safe both *at home and in the community* (means around 9.32 to 9.38) and *in the school environment* (means around 9.10 to 9.58), indicating a strong overall sense of physical safety in their primary environments.

Awareness about *physical violence, bullying, bad touch,* and *legal rights* related to harm scored highly, especially in wellbeing dimensions (means above 9.00), demonstrating that students feel well-informed on these important protective topics.

Scores for *freedom from bullying* at school and on social media show slight variability, with Agency Freedom for bullying at school slightly lower (8.47), suggesting some students may feel less empowered to fully avoid bullying situations. In contrast, field data did not report any cases of bullying or violence in all the five partner schools; however, it is possible that some incidents went unreported, which could explain the lower perceived agency in the survey responses.

Similarly, freedom from *violence and abuse* both at school and at home scored high in wellbeing and agency dimensions, though agency achievement is somewhat lower (around 8.7 to 8.9), indicating room to strengthen students' experiences of safety and empowerment.

Overall, the total mean scores (Wellbeing Freedom = 73.54, Wellbeing Achievement = 72.57, Agency Freedom = 73.09, Agency Achievement = 71.64) indicate that students generally feel safe, informed, and free from violence and abuse. Slightly lower scores in some agency dimensions point to potential areas where student empowerment around bodily integrity can be enhanced.

Table 6:
Descriptive analysis of for the capability Bodily Integrity

Bodily Integrity /Scale (10)	**N**	**Wellbeing Freedom (I am able to) = Mean**	**Wellbeing Achievement (Have) =Mean**	**Agency Freedom (Choose to) =Mean**	**Agency Achievement (have chosen to) =Mean**
I …… feel/felt safe at home and community.	200	9.32	9.25	9.38	9.35
I..... feel/felt safe in my school environment.	200	9.37	9.10	9.58	9.25
I……. be/been made aware of physical violence, bullying, and bad touch	200	9.20	8.74	8.93	8.94
I ..... be/been made aware of rights of harm and violence, legal actions in case of abuse, etc.	200	9.13	9.02	8.97	9.06
I ..... be/been free from bullying at school.	200	8.82	9.22	8.47	8.79
I ……be/been free from bullying on social media.	200	9.07	9.09	9.02	8.67
I ..... be/been free from violence and abuse at school.	200	9.20	9.04	9.45	8.72
I……be/been free from violence and abuse at home.	200	9.44	9.13	9.30	8.88

Valid N (listwise)	200	73.54	72.57	73.09	71.64

7. Understand, Interpret/Plan, Imagine, Think

Table 7 presents descriptive results on *Understand, Interpret, Plan/Imagine and Think* capability. It reflects students' cognitive engagement, planning skills, creative thinking, and help-seeking behaviors, with mean scores ranging from 8.47 to 9.37 across the four dimensions: *Wellbeing Freedom*, *Wellbeing Achievement*, *Agency Freedom*, and *Agency Achievement*.

The highest scores are observed for *asking friends when not understanding course content* under Wellbeing Achievement (mean = 9.37), showing students feel confident and capable in seeking peer support to enhance learning.

Planning for tomorrow and thinking about how to accomplish tasks also received strong mean scores across all dimensions (above 9.00), indicating students are able to and actively engage in forward thinking and organization.

Items related to *imagining and thinking about creative activities* such as making art/crafts and writing poems/stories scored slightly lower but still high (means ranging from about 8.89 to 9.11), reflecting good engagement with creativity. Display boards showcasing students' reading, writing and art corners featuring both teachers' and children's' work were observed in the majority of the sampled schools to promote children's abilities to understand, interpret, and imagine. This aligns with Kellock (2020), who identifies the role of creative, caring learning environments in enabling children to understand and define their well-being and with Hart and Brand (2018), who argue that critical thinking and self-expression thrive when children's autonomy and voice are nurtured.

Asking parents for help had relatively lower agency scores (mean Agency Freedom = 8.47), which might suggest that some students feel less inclined or able to seek parental help compared to peers.

Understanding and interpreting course content also scored highly, with Wellbeing Freedom at 9.17 and Agency Freedom at 9.33, highlighting strong cognitive abilities and motivation.

Overall, the total mean scores (Wellbeing Freedom = 63.01, Wellbeing Achievement = 63.55, Agency Freedom = 62.88, Agency Achievement = 63.43) suggest students demonstrate strong cognitive skills, planning abilities, and help-seeking behaviors. Slightly lower agency scores around parental help-seeking indicate a possible area for encouraging more active engagement with family support in learning.

Table 7:
Descriptive analysis of for the capability Understand, Interpret Plan/Imagine and Think

Understand, Interpret Plan/Imagine and Think /Scale (10)	N	Wellbeing Freedom (I am able to) = Mean	Wellbeing Achievement (Have) =Mean	Agency Freedom (Choose to) =Mean	Agency Achievement (have chosen to) =Mean
I ……plan/planned for tomorrow and think/thought about how to do it.	200	9.03	9.23	9.23	9.30
I ……imagine/imagined and think/thought about making art/crafts	200	9.03	8.91	8.89	9.11
I ..... imagine/imagined and think/thought about writing poems/stories.	200	8.92	8.91	8.97	9.05
I ..... understand/understood and interpret/interpreted the course content taught in class.	200	9.17	9.25	9.33	9.01
I ..... ask/asked my friends when I don't understand course content including homework, and classwork.	200	9.29	9.37	8.86	9.05
I ..... ask/asked my parents when I don't understand course content including homework, and classwork.	200	8.59	8.72	8.47	8.78
I ..... ask/asked my teachers when I don't understand course content including homework, and classwork.	200	9.00	9.18	9.14	9.15
Valid N (listwise)	200	63.01	63.55	62.88	63.43

8. Religion and Identity

Table 8 shows descriptive results of the capability indicator *Religion and Identity* which reflects students' participation in religious activities, freedom of religious practice, respect for others' religions, and understanding and practicing religious virtues. Mean scores across all items and dimensions are consistently high, ranging from approximately 8.64 to 9.59 on the 10-point scale.

Students reported high Wellbeing Freedom and Agency Achievement in *practicing their religion freely without discrimination* (means around 9.29 to 9.31), indicating a strong sense of religious freedom and personal choice in their school environment.

The highest mean scores were observed for *respecting the religion of friends and teachers* (Wellbeing Freedom = 9.53, Agency Achievement = 9.47) and *celebrating religious festivals* (Agency Freedom = 9.59), showing strong respect for diversity and active participation in religious observances.

Participation in religious activities at school had the lowest Wellbeing Freedom score (8.64) but still reflected a high level of engagement overall. Hart and Brando (2018) notes that children are actively forming their religious identities and value spaces in which they can experiment with moral beliefs and spirituality as part of their flourishing. The findings highlight the role of schools in developing inclusive and supportive spaces in which children feel safe and respected in probing their religious and cultural identities facilitating both agency and attainment.

Understanding the teachings of goodness in their religion also scored highly across dimensions (means above 9.26), suggesting that students internalize positive religious values.

Overall, the total mean scores (Wellbeing Freedom = 64.80, Wellbeing Achievement = 64.33, Agency Freedom = 65.09, Agency Achievement = 65.31) indicate that students generally experience strong freedom, achievement, and agency regarding their religious identity. This highlights the importance of religion as a core aspect of their personal and social identity, with an environment that supports respect, practice, and learning.

Table 8:
Descriptive analysis of for the capability Religion and Identity

Religion and Identity /Scale (10)	N	Wellbeing Freedom (I am able to) = Mean	Wellbeing Achievement (Have) =Mean	Agency Freedom (Choose to) =Mean	Agency Achievement (have chosen to) =Mean
I …… participate/participated in religious activities in my school.	200	8.64	9.11	9.02	9.34
I …… practice/practiced my religion freely without feeling discriminated against at school.	200	9.29	9.35	9.07	9.31
I……respect/respected the religion that my friends and teachers follow.	200	9.53	9.38	9.44	9.47
I ..... practice/practiced religious virtues in my daily life.	200	9.15	8.85	9.22	9.21
I …. celebrate/celebrated festivals from my religion.	200	9.48	9.13	9.59	9.43

I…. go/gone to the places of worship of my religion.	200	9.35	9.26	9.26	9.30
I…. understand/understood the teachings of goodness in my religion.	200	9.38	9.26	9.51	9.27
Valid N (listwise)	200	64.80	64.33	65.09	65.31

9. Shelter and Environment

As shown in table 9, the highest mean score is recorded in Agency Achievement (have chosen to) for the item "I … live/lived in a clean residence" (M = 9.53), indicating that students strongly feel they have actively chosen to live in a clean residence. The lowest mean score appears in Agency Freedom (Choose to) for the item "I … contribute/contributed to cleaning my environment at school" (M = 8.77), suggesting that while most students do participate in keeping the school clean, they may perceive this more as a responsibility than a matter of personal choice.

The overall mean scores for five items under Shelter and Environment indicator for Wellbeing Freedom is 44.86 and Wellbeing Achievement is 46.46. Likewise, for Agency Freedom is 46.01 with 46.54 for Agency Achievement. These high average scores indicate that students generally enjoy both the freedom and achievement to live in proper, clean housing and environments. The slightly higher Agency Achievement score suggests that students feel they make deliberate choices to maintain these standards. The small dip in "freedom to choose to clean the school" may reflect that some environmental upkeep activities are structured or mandatory, leaving less sense of autonomy.

Table 9:
Descriptive analysis of for the capability Shelter and Environment

Shelter and Environment/Scale (10)	N	Wellbeing Freedom (I am able to) = Mean	Wellbeing Achievement (Have) =Mean	Agency Freedom (Choose to) =Mean	Agency Achievement (have chosen to) =Mean
I ..... live/lived in proper housing.	200	9.46	9.47	9.42	9.51
I ……. live/lived in a clean residence	200	7.89	9.36	9.49	9.53
I ……live/lived in a clean environment at school	200	9.08	9.17	9.15	9.34
I …… contribute/contributed to cleaning my environment at school.	200	9.19	9.35	8.77	9.17

I..... contribute/contributed to cleaning my residence.	200	9.25	9.13	9.19	9.00
Valid N (listwise)	200	44.86	46.46	46.01	46.54

10. Mental-Wellbeing

As indicated in table 10, the highest mean score appears in Wellbeing Achievement (Have) for the item *"I … feel/felt happy when I come to school"* (M = 9.35), indicating that students generally experience a strong sense of happiness when attending school. The lowest mean score is found in Wellbeing Achievement (Have) for the item *"I … feel/felt scared or afraid when I'm in school"* (M = 7.23), suggesting that while fear exists for some, it is relatively low compared to positive feelings toward school.

The overall mean scores for 4 items under Mental Well-Being capability for Wellbeing Freedom is 34.37 and Wellbeing Achievement is 34.12 while for Agency Freedom is 34.63 and Agency Achievement with 34.72.

These results suggest that students feel both able and willing to maintain good mental well-being in school contexts. The slightly higher scores for *Agency* dimensions indicate that students feel a sense of personal choice and control especially in sharing feelings and staying positive. However, the notably lower scores for "fear in school" point to a small but important minority of students who may experience anxiety or discomfort, highlighting a potential area for targeted emotional support initiatives. These findings highlight the significance of school-level interventions such as counselling and well-being literacy to establish equitable and inclusive emotional environments. Bhutan's education reforms increasingly promote a sense of belonging and resilience from early grades (Dorji, 2023; MoE, 2022; MoESD, 2024). Research further supports teacher preparedness and sensitivity to children's emotional needs as critical to effective inclusion and emotional safety at school (Sharma et al., 2012). This signifies a need for awareness programmes on mental well-being in these schools to ensure that children develop a consistent and clear understanding of it.

Table 10:
Descriptive analysis of for the capability Mental Well-being

Items/Scale (10)	N	Wellbeing Freedom (I am able to) = Mean	Wellbeing Achievement (Have) =Mean	Agency Freedom (Choose to) =Mean	Agency Achievement (have chosen to) =Mean
I…. feel/felt happy when I come to school.	200	9.07	9.35	9.24	9.29

I…. feel/felt scared or afraid when I'm in school.	200	7.33	7.23	7.33	7.58
I…. decide/decided when and with whom to share my feelings (friends, families, teachers	200	8.92	8.81	9.14	8.99
I…. find/found ways to stay positive when I am facing difficulties in school.	200	9.06	8.73	8.92	8.87
Valid N (listwise)	200	34.37	34.12	34.63	34.72

11. Social Relations

As depicted in table 11, the highest mean score appears in Wellbeing Freedom **(**I am able to**)** for the item *"I … make/made friends"* (M = 9.72), followed closely by its corresponding Wellbeing Achievement (Have) score (M = 9.69). This indicates that students feel highly capable of forming friendships and also report actually having such relationships. The lowest mean score is in Wellbeing Freedom and Agency Freedom for the item *"I … give/given support when someone needs it"* (M = 9.02 for both), suggesting that while still high, students may perceive slightly less ease in providing support to others compared to other social aspects.

The overall mean scores for five items under Social Relations capability for Wellbeing Freedom is 37.12 and Wellbeing Achievement is 37.17 while for Agency Freedom and Agency Achievement is = 37.01 and 37.29 respectively.

These consistently high scores across all four dimensions reflect strong social integration and supportive relationships within the student community. The slightly higher "Achievement" means that students not only value these connections but also experience them in reality. These findings align with Knight and McNaught (2011) who affirm that positive social relationships are central to building emotional resilience, empathy, and a sense of belonging that lasts. In line with that, Bhutan's policy reforms in education, including the Education Blueprint 2014–2024 and the proposed National Education Policy (MoE, 2014; MoE, 2022), that encourage co-curricular activities, youth engagement, and parent–teacher collaboration in building emotionally safe, caring school cultures. The small difference in giving versus receiving support may indicate a need to encourage proactive helping behaviours, complementing the already strong sense of belonging and cooperation.

Table 11:
Descriptive analysis of for the capability social relations

Items/Scale (10)	N	Wellbeing Freedom (I am able to) =Mean	Wellbeing Achievement (Have) =Mean	Agency Freedom (Choose to) =Mean	Agency Achievement (have chosen to) =Mean

I……live/lived in a harmonious community with cooperation.	200	9.19	8.95	9.20	8.90
I…….follow/followed societal norms.	200	9.18	9.08	9.22	9.04
I ……make/made friends.	200	9.72	9.69	9.65	9.61
I ..... get/gotten help and support when I need it.	200	9.21	9.24	9.13	9.38
I ……. give/given support when someone needs it.	200	9.02	9.16	9.02	9.26
Valid N (listwise)	200	37.12	37.17	37.01	37.29

12. Autonomy

As shown in table 12, the mean scores for the autonomy-related items ranged from 7.61 to 9.47 across the four dimensions: *Wellbeing Freedom (I am able to)*, *Wellbeing Achievement (Have)*, *Agency Freedom (Choose to)*, and *Agency Achievement (Have chosen to)*.

The highest mean scores were recorded for the item *"I… do/done things I like in my free time like playing"* under Agency Achievement (mean = 9.47) and Agency Freedom (mean = 9.26), indicating that students feel empowered to choose and engage in enjoyable activities during their leisure time.

Similarly, *personal development activities* (do/done activities that help me learn and grow) scored high across all dimensions, especially in Agency Freedom (9.35) and Agency Achievement (9.33), suggesting that students actively choose learning and growth opportunities.

The lowest scores appeared in *"I… do/done things without always needing permission from my parents"*, particularly in Wellbeing Freedom (mean = 7.61) and Agency Achievement (mean = 8.09). This suggests a relatively lower sense of independence in decision-making without parental approval.

Overall, the total mean scores (Wellbeing Freedom = 52.62, Wellbeing Achievement = 53.65, Agency Freedom = 54.51, Agency Achievement = 54.46) indicate that students report high autonomy in both ability and actual practice, with slightly stronger perceptions of agency (choice and self-directed action) than wellbeing (having or being able to have). The findings suggest that while students generally enjoy a high level of freedom and self-determination, certain areas—particularly independence from parental permission remain more constrained.

Table 12:
Descriptive analysis of for the capability Autonomy

Autonomy/ Items/Scale (10)	N	Wellbeing Freedom (I am able to) =Mean	Wellbeing Achievement (Have) =Mean	Agency Freedom (Choose to) =Mean	Agency Achievement (have chosen to) =Mean
I…..make/made decisions about personal choices like selecting the clothes I wear.	200	9.15	8.90	9.25	9.40
I….do/done things I like in my free time like playing.	200	9.32	9.27	9.26	9.47
I….do/done activities that help me learn and grow (personal development).	200	9.20	9.29	9.35	9.33
I….properly utilize/utilized my time.	200	8.85	8.95	9.11	8.96
I….do/done things without always needing permission from my parents.	200	7.61	8.14	8.33	8.09
I ……enjoy/enjoyed activities like playing, reading, or pursuing hobbies on my own without external pressure.	200	8.50	9.11	9.23	9.23
Valid N (listwise)	200	52.62	53.65	54.51	54.46

13. Freedom from Economic/Non-Economic Exploitation

Table 13 presents descriptive results for the capability *Freedom from Economic/Non-Economic Exploitation* which reflects students' awareness of their legal rights, regular school attendance free from work-related interruptions, and prioritization of study time over household or work duties. The mean scores are high across all items and dimensions, ranging from approximately 8.73 to 9.42 on the 10-point scale.

Students reported strong Wellbeing Achievement (mean = 9.42) in attending school regularly without being asked to miss school for work or household chores, highlighting effective protection from exploitation in this regard.

Awareness of legal rights to protect themselves from exploitation scored highly across all dimensions (means around 9.15 to 9.24), indicating students feel informed and empowered about their rights.

The item *"give more time to study than work"* had slightly lower agency scores (Agency Freedom = 8.92, Agency Achievement = 8.73), suggesting some students may face challenges in balancing study time and household duties.

Overall, the total mean scores for 3 items for (Wellbeing Freedom = 27.26, Wellbeing Achievement = 27.77, Agency Freedom = 27.19, Agency Achievement = 27.24) show that students generally experience strong protection from economic and non-economic exploitation, with good awareness and capacity to prioritize education. Some room exists for supporting students to better balance study and household responsibilities.

Table 13:
Descriptive analysis of for the capability Freedom from Economic/Non-Economic Exploitation

Freedom from Economic/Non-Economic Exploitation /Scale (10)	N	Wellbeing Freedom (I am able to) =Mean	Wellbeing Achievement (Have) =Mean	Agency Freedom (Choose to) =Mean	Agency Achievement (have chosen to) =Mean
I ……get/gotten information about my legal rights to protect myself from exploitation.	**200**	**9.24**	**9.15**	**9.22**	**9.15**
I ..... attend/attended school regularly without being asked to miss it for work or household chores	**200**	**8.98**	**9.42**	**9.06**	**9.37**
I ……give/given more time to study than time for work (household work).	**200**	**9.04**	**9.20**	**8.92**	**8.73**
		27.26	**27.77**	**27.19**	**27.24**
Valid N (listwise)	**200**				

The analysis generally reflected an overall high mean score among the variables for wellbeing and agency freedom and achievement. However, slightly lower mean scores for, "*give more time to study than work"* (Agency Freedom = 8.92, Agency Achievement = 8.73), suggests a need for targeted interventions. These could include school programmes that raise awareness on legal rights and protection in ensuring that no child is left behind due to economic and non-economic exploitation. Anand et al. (2009) argue that exploitation undermines real freedoms individuals need to pursue well-being. This is further supported by Hasan (2009) who contends that

resource poverty heightens vulnerability to economic exploitation. Broader structural inequalities in education, health, and participation perpetuate marginalisation and limit substantive freedoms highlighting the necessity of systemic protections within home settings.

14. Participation

Table 14 presents descriptive results for the capability *Participation which* measures students' involvement in classroom and extracurricular activities, including social interactions, questioning, and responding in class. Mean scores across all items and dimensions range from 8.49 to 9.35, indicating high levels of participation.

The highest scores were observed for *participating in conversations outside the classroom among friends* (Wellbeing Freedom = 9.35, Wellbeing Achievement = 9.25), reflecting strong social engagement and comfort in peer interactions.

Participation in *extracurricular activities* and *raising hands in class* also scored highly across dimensions (means generally above 9.00), indicating active involvement in both school events and classroom interactions.

Answering questions in the classroom showed consistent high scores (Agency Freedom = 9.25, Wellbeing Achievement = 9.18), suggesting students feel confident and motivated to contribute academically.

Slightly lower scores appeared in *participation in sports activities* (Wellbeing Achievement = 8.51) and *questioning teachers* (Wellbeing Achievement = 8.49), which may indicate these are areas where participation could be encouraged further.

However, slightly lower means appeared in *participation in sports activities* (Wellbeing Achievement = 8.51) and *questioning teachers* (Wellbeing Achievement = 8.49 emphasises the need for institution-level initiatives focusing on equitable access, opportunities and meaningful child participation in academic and sports activities to boost their achievement in these areas. Esteban (2022) and UNESCO (2020) report that attendance is not just about participation but about voice, agency, and the capacity to give. This is further supported by Bhutan's draft NEP (MoE, 2022) which asserts that developing child participation through co-curricular integration and leadership exposure is critical to developing GNH-based citizenship, esteem building, and empowering all children especially those at risk of being left behind to thrive as engaged stakeholders in their own learning process.

Overall, the total mean scores across 6 items for (Wellbeing Freedom = 54.29, Wellbeing Achievement = 53.18, Agency Freedom = 54.19, Agency Achievement = 54.85) suggest that students demonstrate strong freedom, achievement, and agency in participating and engaging both socially and academically, with minor opportunities to enhance participation in sports and classroom questioning.

Table 14:

Descriptive analysis of for the capability Participation

Items/Scale (10)	N	Wellbeing Freedom (I am able to) =Mean	Wellbeing Achievement (Have) =Mean	Agency Freedom (Choose to) =Mean	Agency Achievement (have chosen to) =Mean
I ..... participate/participated in conversations outside the classroom among friends.	200	9.35	9.25	9.05	9.23
I……participate/participated in extracurricular activities (all school activities and events).	200	9.00	9.05	8.92	9.16
I ..... participate/participated in sports activities	200	8.83	8.51	8.84	9.03
I ..... raise/raised my hand in the classroom.	200	9.09	8.72	9.07	9.27
I ..... question/questioned my teachers in the classroom	200	8.89	8.49	9.06	9.03
I ..... answer/answered questions in the classroom.	200	9.14	9.18	9.25	9.14
Valid N (listwise)	200	54.29	53.18	54.19	54.85

In this respect, CA emphasises the fundamental role of school children's participation in the selection of school leaders and in democratic decision-making processes. More broadly, it highlights their ability to engage in the life of the school community and to contribute to decisions that affect their own lives and those of their peers. Such participation in democratic decision making not only provides oneself with freedom to do something not only for oneself but also for their peers, is considered as one of the elementary freedoms that children have reason to value.

15. Mobility

Table 15 shows descriptive results for the capability m*obility which* reflects students' independence and safety in moving around their environment, including going to school,

commuting within the village, and social visits. Mean scores across items and dimensions range from 7.45 to 9.20 on the 10-point scale.

The highest scores were reported for *going to school by myself* in Wellbeing Freedom (mean = 9.12) and Agency Freedom (mean = 9.14), indicating students generally feel capable and choose to travel independently. However, the Wellbeing Achievement score for this item is notably lower (7.45), suggesting that while students feel able, fewer actually do go to school alone regularly. A possible explanation for this is likely because of structural arrangements rather than lack of ability. Since many schools in Bhutan have boarding facilities and day scholars are commonly picked up and dropped off by school buses, the opportunity to exercise that freedom is limited even if students are capable of it.

Visiting friends when needed scored highly across all dimensions (means above 8.9), reflecting strong social mobility and autonomy in meeting friends while *Safely commuting within the village* also received high and consistent scores (means ranging from 8.60 to 9.05), indicating students generally feel safe and free in their daily travel within their communities.

In contrast, strolling around the village with friends showed slightly lower scores (means around 8.4 to 8.6), which may suggest less frequent or less free movement in this informal social activity. A key reason could be that, except for one partner school, all other four have boarding facilities with strict rules requiring students to remain in their hostels by 7:00 p.m. For day scholars, opportunities may also be limited: in rural areas, homes are often scattered across large distances. These contextual factors may explain the relatively lower scores for this item.

Overall, the total mean scores (Wellbeing Freedom = 35.66, Wellbeing Achievement = 33.40, Agency Freedom = 35.72, Agency Achievement = 35.58) suggest that students enjoy a high level of perceived freedom and motivation related to mobility and safety, though actual achievement in some activities (like going to school alone) may be more limited. This highlights potential areas to support greater independent mobility and safe access for students.

Table 15:

Descriptive analysis of for the capability Mobility

Items/Scale (10)	N	Wellbeing Freedom (I am able to) =Mean	Wellbeing Achievement (Have) =Mean	Agency Freedom (Choose to) =Mean	Agency Achievement (have chosen to) =Mean
I ..... go/gone to school by myself.	200	9.12	7.45	9.14	8.90
I ..... safely commute/commuted within the village.	200	8.89	8.60	8.89	9.05

I ..... visit/visited my friends when needed.	200	9.11	8.95	9.08	9.20
I ..... stroll/strolled around the village with my friends.	200	8.54	8.41	8.61	8.44
Valid N (listwise)	200	35.66	33.40	35.72	35.58

16. Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) Curriculum

Table 16 indicates descriptive results of the capability Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Curriculum which reflects students' access to and engagement with curriculum content related to health, hygiene, social tolerance, gender equity, disability rights, and support for people in need. Mean scores across the items range from approximately 8.66 to 9.16 across the four dimensions of *Wellbeing Freedom*, *Wellbeing Achievement*, *Agency Freedom*, and *Agency Achievement*.

The highest score was for receiving *information about gender equity and social inclusion* (Wellbeing Freedom = 9.16, Agency Achievement = 9.04), indicating strong curricular emphasis and student engagement with this important social topic.

Information about *health care and hygiene* also scored highly, especially in Agency Achievement (9.14), showing students actively use and value this knowledge.

Items related to *religious and social tolerance*, *equal treatment of persons with disabilities*, and *equal treatment to people in need* all scored consistently high, reflecting a curriculum that supports awareness and inclusiveness in diverse areas.

The slightly lower Agency Freedom scores (e.g., 8.66 for equal treatment to people in need) may suggest some variability in students' choice or motivation to engage with certain topics. These disparities highlight the need for curricular reforms that move beyond the mere delivery of academic content to also address discrimination, promote equitable subject choice, and ensure access to enabling learning resources. As Unterhalter (2023) argues, gender equality in education requires relational and structural transformation rather than simply increasing access or enrolment. Similarly, Walker (2006) emphasises the creation of respectful and dignified spaces particularly for girls, so that all learners can realise their full potential. Strengthening the GESI curriculum to provide consistently respectful, equitable, and inclusive learning experiences is therefore central to advancing students' agency and promoting genuinely inclusive education.

Overall, the total mean scores (Wellbeing Freedom = 45.11, Wellbeing Achievement = 44.01, Agency Freedom = 44.42, Agency Achievement = 44.94) indicate that students feel

well-informed and generally motivated to engage with curriculum content that promotes health, equity, and social inclusion, supporting their development as socially conscious individuals.

Table 16:

Descriptive analysis of for the capability GESI Curriculum

Items/Scale (10)	N	Wellbeing Freedom (I am able to) =Mean	Wellbeing Achievement (Have) =Mean	Agency Freedom (Choose to) =Mean	Agency Achievement (have chosen to) =Mean
I ..... get/gotten information about health care and hygiene through my curriculum.	200	8.75	9.03	9.07	9.14
I ..... get/gotten information about religious and social tolerance through my curriculum.	200	9.09	8.66	8.97	8.87
I ..... get/gotten information about gender equity and social inclusion through my curriculum.	200	9.16	8.76	8.94	9.04
I ..... get/gotten information about equal treatment of Persons with Disabilities through my curriculum.	200	9.08	8.78	8.79	8.90
I ..... get/gotten information about equal treatment to people in need through my curriculum.	200	9.05	8.79	8.66	9.01
Valid N (listwise)	200	45.11	44.01	44.42	44.94

CONCLUSION, RECOMMENDATION AND LIMITATION

This baseline study applied the Capability Approach (CA) to evaluate children's assessments of the availability, satisfaction, and perceived importance of resources within school settings, to understand how these contribute to their overall well-being. It also examined children's perceptions of agency and wellbeing by focusing on the sixteen valued educational capabilities identified through a situational analysis conducted in five secondary schools within Samtse Dzongkhag. Their perceptions were assessed using the four core wellbeing metrics of CA: Wellbeing Freedom, Wellbeing Achievement, Agency Freedom, and Agency Achievement.

The findings reveal that children reported strong satisfaction in foundational areas such as opportunities to learn and read, infrastructure, emotional security, involvement, and spiritual expression, with Tashithang MSS emerging as a model for inclusive, equitable, and capability-oriented education. However, inequities remain, most noticeably in Peljorling HSS and Yoseltse HSS, where variations in student responses reflect inequalities in access to substantive learning, emotional security, autonomy, and safe mobility. Structural resources such as classrooms, clubs, and toilets were also found to be insufficient, with equality depending not only on their availability but also on how these resources are lived and translated into meaningful capabilities. Unadaptive school rituals, limited extracurricular opportunities, weak emotional support, and exclusionary pedagogical practices further constrain children, particularly younger and marginalized groups, from thriving, while relational spaces and peer-led processes for voice and agency remain underdeveloped.

At the same time, the study shows that Bhutanese schools provide an encouraging foundation for children's well-being, belonging, and capability development, with many students expressing high levels of satisfaction in areas such as love, care, respect, social relationships, and educational opportunities. Strong scores in capabilities related to emotional support and peer connections highlight the potential of schools as nurturing environments for holistic development. Nevertheless, persistent gaps limit children's full exercise of freedoms and opportunities, as wellbeing achievement scores (47.40) are generally stronger than wellbeing freedom scores (47.18), suggesting that autonomy and independent decision-making remain underdeveloped. Challenges are most evident in aspirations, mobility, and mental wellbeing, where students report feeling less secure or less free to act on their choices. Infrastructural limitations including inadequate toilets, lack of disabled-friendly facilities, and insufficient extracurricular spaces further constrain the conversion of available resources into lived capabilities.

Overall, the study indicates that while students' achievements are stronger than their freedoms, pointing to a system where accomplishments are encouraged but autonomy is restricted, this imbalance highlights the need to strengthen agency by fostering student voice, participation, and self-directed growth. Addressing these gaps requires targeted interventions that prioritize inclusivity, accessibility, and emotional support alongside academic achievement, ensuring that Bhutanese education moves closer to enabling all children to flourish with dignity, freedom, and resilience.

Recommendations

To address the mentioned inequalities and facilitate all Bhutanese children to utilise their capabilities to achieve what they value and aspire to do and be, a cross-sectoral and whole-school reform agenda is essential. In achieving this, the following suggestions are recommended:

1. Strengthen school infrastructure with usability, safety, and accessibility in mind especially for disabled children and marginalised groups. Additionally, prioritise inclusive access to the classroom, sanitation, sports, and recreational facilities.

2. Embed inclusive pedagogies that cater to the needs of diverse learners. For example, train teachers in Universal Design for Learning (UDL), trauma-sensitive teaching, and differentiation to improve equitable participation and achievement.

3. Commit to school counselling, mindfulness, and socio-emotional learning programmes. Protect children' s physical integrity through clear safeguarding policies and interventions to prevent exploitation and harassment.

4. Establish peer-driven spaces and frameworks for children's voice and action. Similarly, support co-curricular activities that enhance agency, confidence, and civic participation.

5. Embed gender equality, identity, and religious inclusivity in curricula and school culture. Likewise, promote culturally responsive pedagogy to foster a feeling of belonging and commonality among students.

6. Institutionalise school-level and locality-based action plans to improve school children's mobility (e.g., safe walking to school, transport assistance, classroom chairs, tables, spaces etc.,) and fulfill nutritional needs to prepare all pupils for healthy living and learning.

7. Provide targeted intervention to underperforming schools such as Peljorling HSS through evidence-informed school development models and continuous teacher professional development. Additionally, strengthen accountability and feedback systems to enable balanced reform.

8. Shift from access-based education towards a model that focuses on equality of outcomes (Capability-led), self-agency, and participation. In addition, design institution-wide or whole-school approach systems that connect intellectual and non-intellectual support to enable children's overall growth.

By taking these steps, Bhutan's education system can become one that not only offers access but ensures every child has the agency and support to lead a rich, meaningful, empowered, and accomplished life thereby promoting GESI in schools.

Limitations

While the findings are practical and applicable, certain limitations must be highlighted. The investigation was confined to five schools within one specific area, which potentially limits the generalisability and applicability of the findings to Bhutan's diverse environments. Children's self-report data may pose the potential issue of biases such as social desirability, as well as limited critical scrutiny. Despite a GESI emphasis, the voices of the most marginalised i.e., disabled or poor and rural children may not have been fully captured. The cross-sectional design reveals only temporal states and loses longer-term trends and change. Further, having the researcher present during data collection could have influenced participant behavior, and the largely quantitative methodology was thin on the depth of qualitative exploration necessary to answer the "why" of certain student experience. In addition, measuring such abilities as aspiration and well-being through standardised survey instruments is conceptually challenging. Finally, while mentions were made to policy, the study did not delve deep into policy intention-practice gaps at the school level, a subject that warrants greater institution and governance-oriented investigation in future research.

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