Exploring Children's Understanding of Well-being Through the Capability Approach:

A Study of Bhojpur District, Nepal

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Title: Exploring Children's Understanding of Well-being Through the Capability Approach:
A Study of Bhojpur District, Nepal

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This research explores how school-going children understand well-being through the lens of the Capability Approach (CA), with a focus on community schools in Bhojpur District, Nepal. Although the concept of children's well-being has gained increasing global interest, much of the discourse remains dominated by adult-defined indicators. These frameworks often neglect to account for how children themselves define and understand the concept of living well. This study seeks to fill this gap by prioritizing the voices and interpretations of children, acknowledging them as active participants who can articulate their perspectives on well-being, aspirations, and available opportunities.

This study draws on the Capability Approach as established by Amartya Sen (1999) and further developed by Nussbaum (2011), Biggeri (2007), Robeyns (2003), and others, the study emphasizes the need to assess well-being not only in terms of achieved outcomes (functionings) but also in terms of real freedoms (capabilities) that enable children to pursue valued ways of being and doing. Methodologically, the research employed a concurrent mixed-methods design using a participatory Capability Booklet consisting of two sections. In the first section, 56 children (Grades 6–8) from five community schools were asked to rate the importance of 21 capability domains for their well-being on a scale of 1–10, generating quantitative data on children's prioritizations. In the second section, children provided examples for each domain in their own words, producing qualitative data that illuminated their lived understandings and everyday meanings of well-being. The integrated analysis combined descriptive statistics and thematic interpretation to identify both patterns of prioritization and conceptual depth across gender, age, and grade levels.

The findings indicate that children understand well-being as multidimensional, relational, and process-oriented. Their understanding extend beyond material sufficiency or academic success to encompass emotional security, mutual respect, participation, gender equality, physical health, and opportunities for self-expression. Love and care, education, and respect emerged as top-ranked capabilities, while children's narratives emphasized cleanliness, friendship, respect, and the ability to dream about the future as vital elements of living well. The data also indicate subtle gendered and age-based differences in prioritizations, reflecting diverse conversion factors such as social expectations and school experiences.

Overall, the study demonstrates that children possess a sophisticated understanding of well-being grounded in everyday interactions and freedoms. Children exhibit an implicit grasp of agency central to the Capability Approach by distinguishing between resources ("having") and real opportunities to act ("being able to do"). The research concludes that incorporating children's understanding is essential for developing inclusive educational and social policies that genuinely reflect what children value and aspire to be. This child-centered framing not only challenges traditional adult-centric paradigms of well-being but also contributes to the broader discourse on equity, participation, and human development in the context of rural Nepal.

Keywords: Children's well-being, Capability Approach, Agency, Participation, Education, Nepal, Child-centered research

Declaration

I affirm that this dissertation is my original work and has not been submitted to any educational institution for the fulfillment of any other academic degree.

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Disclaimers

This project titled "Promoting Gender Equality and Social Inclusion in Schools Building on What Children Value and Aspire to Do and Be" being implemented by LIKE Lab, Kathmandu University School of Arts with support from the Global Partnership for Education and Innovation Exchange (GPE KIX) and International Development Research Centre (IDRC). The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent those of IDRC or its Board of Governors.

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Acronyms

CA	Capability Approach
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GESI	Gender Equality and Social Inclusion
HDI	Human Development Index
IDRC	International Development Research Centre
KIX	Knowledge and Innovation Exchange
LIKE Lab	Learning, Innovation, and Knowledge Exchange Lab
MoEST	Ministry of Education, Science and Technology
OOSC	Out-of-School Children
P4C	Philosophy for Children
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund

Table of Contents

Abstract **i**

Declaration **iii**

Approved **iv**

Disclaimers **v**

Acknowledgements **vi**

Acronyms **vii**

List of Tables **xi**

List of Figures **xii**

Chapter I **Introduction** **1**

- Background of the Study 1
- Statement of the Problem 2
- Rationale of the Study 3
- Objectives of the Study 4
- Research Questions 4
- Limitations of the Study 4
- Delimitation of the study 4
- Organization of the Study 5

Chapter II **Literature review** **6**

- Well-Being: Concepts, Debates, and Measures 6
  - *Competing Perspectives* 6
  - *Philosophical Accounts of Well-Being* 7
  - *Contemporary Science and Policy Usage* 7
- The Capability Approach: Theoretical Foundations 7
  - *Origins and Development* 7
  - *Key Concepts* 9
- Children's Well-Being: From Protection to Participation 10
  - *Introduction to Children's Well-Being* 10
  - *The Importance of Understanding Children's Perspectives on Well-Being* 11
  - *Limitations of Adult-Centric and Economistic Models* 11
  - *Children's Well-Being in the Capability Approach* 12
  - *Empirical Evidence on Children's Conceptions of Well-Being* 12
- Operationalizing the Capability Approach for Children 12
  - *Universal vs. Contextual Lists* 12
  - *Capability Lists and Domains for Children & Education* 13

- *Debates and Recurring Domains* 16
- *Capability List for Children's Well-Being: Mapping to This Study* 16
- *Subjective Data & Child Voice* 17

Education, Schooling, and Capabilities 18
- *Education as Capability and Converter* 18
- *Schools as Enabling/Constraining Spaces* 18
- *Non-Institutional Supports & Governance* 19

Children's Well-Being and Education in Nepal/South Asia 19

Conceptual Framework for This Study 21

Chapter III **Research methodology** **24**

Research Approach and Design 24

Description of field site 24

Duration of the study 25

Participants and Sampling Strategy 25
- *Gender of the Respondents* 25
- *Grade of the Respondents* 26
- *Age of the Respondents* 26

Data Collection Method 26
- *Instrument Development: Capability Booklet* 26
- *Group Discussions* 27
- *Observation and Field Notes* 27

Data Analysis Procedures 27
- *Descriptive aggregation of rankings* 27
- *Thematic analysis* 28

Chapter IV **Findings & Analysis** **29**

Children's Prioritization of Well-Being Domains 29
- *Children's Overall Prioritization of Well-Being Domains* 29
- *Children's Prioritization of Well-being Domains by Gender* 31
- *Children's Prioritization of Well-being Domains by Grade Level* 32
- *Children's Prioritization of Well-being Domains by Age Groups* 34

Children's Understanding of Well-Being Domains 35
- *Children's Overall Understanding of Well-being* 35
- *Children's Understanding of Well-being Domains by Gender* 39
- *Children's Understanding of Well-being Domains by Grades* 42
- *Children's Understanding of Well-being Domains by Age Groups* 45

Chapter V **Conclusion** **48**

References **50**

Annex **53**

Annex A: School Information Profile 53

Annex B: Capability Booklet Used During Data Collection 53

List of Tables

Table 2.1 Martha Nussbaum's List: Central Human Capabilities 14
Table 2.2 Mario Biggeri Capability list for Children 14
Table 2.3 Ingrid Robeyn's Capability List 15
Table 2.4 Melanie Walker List 16

Table 3.1 Gender of the Respondents 26
Table 3.2 Grade of the Respondents 26
Table 3.3 Age of the Respondents 26

Table 4.1 Children's Understanding of Well-Being Domains 36
Table 4.2 Children's Understanding of Well-being Domains by Gender 39
Table 4.3 Children's Understanding of Well-Being Domains by Grades 42
Table 4.4 Children's Understanding of Well-being Domains by Age Group 45

List of Figures

Figure 2.1 Conceptual framework of the study 22

Figure 3.1 Maps of Bhojpur district, Nepal 25

Figure 4.1 Children's Overall Prioritization of Well-Being Domains 30
Figure 4.2 Children's Prioritization of Well-being Domains by Gender 32
Figure 4.3 Children's Prioritization of Well-being Domains by Grade Level 33
Figure 4.4 Children's Prioritization of Well-being Domains by Age Groups 35

Figure B.1 Cover page of the Children's Capability Booklet 53
Figure B.2 Capability prioritization rating section (Part 1) 54
Figure B.3 Capability prioritization rating section (Part 2) 54
Figure B.4 Meaning-making (Understanding) example section (Part 1) 55
Figure B.5 Meaning-making (Understanding) example section (Part 2) 55

Chapter I

Introduction

This chapter introduces the study by situating it within the broader context of children's well-being and its relevance to development discourse. It outlines the theoretical and practical significance of examining well-being from children's own perspectives and explains the need to frame this inquiry through the Capability Approach. The chapter presents the statement of the problem, highlighting the gap between policy-level definitions of well-being and children's lived realities, followed by the research objectives, questions, and rationale that guide the study. It also delineates the study's limitations, clarifying its scope, focus, and boundaries.

Background of the Study

The concept of well-being has historically been a focal point of philosophical, moral, and ethical reflection across cultures and epochs. Different civilizations, religions, and political ideologies have offered distinct interpretations of what it means to live well, each reflecting their foundational values and socio-cultural contexts. From classical traditions to modern philosophical thought, these conceptions of well-being continue to influence contemporary discourse. Buddha emphasized compassion, moderation, and mindfulness; Confucius valued altruism, respect, and obedience; and Aristotle's concept of eudaimonia focused on achieving a fulfilling life through virtue. Similarly, both religions, such as Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, and Enlightenment philosophies, such as Kant's duty ethics and Bentham's utilitarianism, defined well-being through moral conduct, rational principles, and the pursuit of collective happiness.

In the field of Development Studies, well-being has emerged as a critical analytical and normative framework for understanding human progress beyond purely economic growth. Within this broader discourse, children's well-being has gained remarkable prominence, as scholars, policymakers, and practitioners increasingly recognize the need to build inclusive, rights-based, and equitable social systems that account for children's unique experiences and evolving capacities. Consequently, understanding child well-being has become central to contemporary dialogues on development, social justice, and policy reform.

Different frameworks, programs, and interventions have been designed to enhance children's health, education, protection, and overall welfare. Institutions at local, national, and international levels frequently advocate for children's rights and development, and there exists a broad normative consensus that children ought to be nurtured and safeguarded. However, prevailing approaches to child well-being remain largely adult-centric, shaped by normative assumptions about what constitutes a "good life" for children. These models often rely on economic indicators, school enrollment rates, or health and service delivery metrics, which, though important, fail to capture the subjective and experiential dimensions of well-being as perceived by children themselves. As a result, children's own perspectives, values, and voices remain underrepresented in both research and policy.

Well-being is not a monolithic experience but a dynamic, context-dependent construct influenced by social, cultural, and economic factors. This study seeks to address the existing gap by exploring well-being from the perspective of children themselves, grounded in the Capability Approach (CA) developed by Amartya Sen. The Capability Approach reorients our understanding of development away from resources or happiness and toward the real freedoms individuals have to pursue lives they value. It provides a particularly valuable lens for understanding child well-being because it foregrounds agency, choice, and the influence of contextual constraints.

In the context of Nepal, substantial efforts have been made to improve access to education and strengthen child rights frameworks, particularly in rural and marginalized regions. Yet, a persistent disconnect remains between national policy commitments and children's lived realities. This gap is especially pronounced in districts such as Bhojpur, a remote hilly area in eastern Nepal characterized by limited infrastructure, scarce resources, and complex socio-cultural hierarchies. Although national indicators may suggest progress in education and child development, children's well-being in such settings is often shaped by locally specific aspirations and constraints.

This study, therefore, explores how children in community schools in Bhojpur understand well-being and identify the capabilities they consider essential for leading a good life. It will offer a locally grounded and participatory understanding of well-being from children's own perspectives, in contrast to adult-constructed or externally imposed models. In doing so, it aims to inform more responsive educational, developmental, and care-based interventions that align with what children themselves value and aspire to be.

Statement of the Problem

Global and national agendas increasingly emphasize children's well-being as a central concern in development and rights-based policy. However, the dominant frameworks used to define and measure child well-being remain largely adult-centric. These frameworks typically rely on externally designed indicators, such as school attendance, health outcomes, or material resources, that privilege adult assumptions over children's own interpretations, priorities, and lived realities. This creates a persistent gap between top-down unserstanding of well-being and the subjective experiences of children themselves.

This orientation is grounded in the assumption that adults can speak for children, thereby marginalizing children's meaning-making capacities and the evolving nature of their agency (Peleg, 2019). As a result, children frequently appear in research and policy as passive recipients of protection and services, rather than as active social actors with legitimate perspectives on what it means to live well. Although contemporary discourse advocates for child-centered approaches, children's voices are seldom included in defining well-being itself. Thus, policies often speak about children and for children, but rarely with them. This paradox exposes a long-standing tension between rhetorical commitments to participation and the continued epistemic exclusion of children.

The Capability Approach offers a conceptual bridge between rights, development, and children's agency. Yet, as Domínguez-Serrano and del Moral-Espín (2022) note, empirical applications of the CA to child well-being remain scarce, particularly in the Global South, and are often concentrated in European contexts. While Biggeri (2004, 2006) and colleagues have demonstrated through participatory studies in Italy, India, and Uganda that children are capable of identifying and valuing their own capabilities, such bottom-up approaches are rare in South Asian contexts like Nepal.

In Nepal, policy frameworks, including the Constitution of Nepal (2015), the Children's Act (2018), the Child Policy (2012), the National Child Labor Elimination Master Plan (2018–2028), and the School Education Sector Plan (2022–2030), affirm commitments to children's rights and well-being. Nepal's Equity Index aims to identify and reduce educational disparities across regions and social groups. However, the index remains broad, under-specified, and methodologically opaque, providing limited insight into how equity is understood or monitored. Crucially, these initiatives rarely engage children in defining what a "good life" means to them, nor do they account for how well-being is shaped by everyday school experiences and social relations.

This conceptual and empirical lacuna is particularly pronounced in rural districts like Bhojpur, where schooling often constitutes children's primary institutional experience of the state, and where intersecting axes of gender, caste, and economic status mediate opportunities for flourishing. In such contexts, the assumption that standardized educational access equates to well-being obscures disparities in agency, participation, and recognition. Understanding children's well-being thus requires more than cataloging service delivery; it necessitates eliciting children's own voices about what constitutes a valued life and examining how these priorities vary across age, gender, and schooling stage.

This study addresses a fundamental blind spot in both development research and child policy: the disjunction between the rhetoric of participation and the epistemic exclusion of children's perspectives. This research seeks to reconstruct the notion of well-being by engaging children in community schools in Bhojpur to rank and interpret 21 capability domains derived from established CA frameworks (Nussbaum, 2000; Walker, 2006; Biggeri et al., 2006; Robeyns, 2017). Through analyzing how children understand and prioritize capabilities and how these vary by gender, grade, and age, the study aims to expose the conversion factors that shape children's freedoms and aspirations in everyday school life. In doing so, the research not only contributes to theoretical debates on adapting the Capability Approach to childhood but also provides empirical grounding for a child-centered, context-sensitive framework of well-being in Nepal. It challenges the dominance of adult-defined development indicators and advances a participatory epistemology where children's voices inform both academic understanding and policy design.

Rationale of the Study

This study contributes to both theoretical and practical domains of development and education research. Theoretically, it deepens the application of the Capability Approach to child well-being by demonstrating how children can articulate and evaluate the conditions that matter most to them. It challenges the traditional adult-centered paradigm by foregrounding children's agency and their capacity for reflective reasoning.

Empirically, the study generates new evidence from rural community schools in Bhojpur District, an under-researched region of Nepal. The findings provide insights into how local realities, such as gender norms, socioeconomic constraints, and institutional conditions, shape children's capability formation. This evidence can inform the design of child-centered, inclusive, and participatory educational policies.

At a broader level, the study contributes to the discourse on equitable and inclusive education, reinforcing the idea that well-being is not merely a developmental outcome but also a process of expanding freedoms and participation. The results can guide policymakers, educators, and child-focused organizations in developing interventions that are responsive to what children themselves value.

Objectives of the Study

The general objective of this study is to explore how school-going children understand and prioritize well-being in their own words through the lens of the Capability Approach.

The specific objectives of this study are:

- To explore how children understand well-being in their own words and examples.
- To examine the relative importance that children assign to different capabilities in shaping their well-being.
- To analyze variations in children's understanding and priorities by gender, grade, and age.

Research Questions

The research is guided by the following questions:

- How do children understand well-being in their own terms?
- Which capabilities do children prioritize as most important for their well-being, and how do they rank them?
- How do children's perspectives and interpretations vary according to gender, age, and grade?

Limitations of the Study

While the study offers valuable insights into children's understanding of well-being, certain limitations must be acknowledged.

1. **Contextual Scope**: The research was conducted in five community schools in Bhojpur District, limiting its generalizability to other contexts.
2. **Sample and Representation:** The study involved 56 students from Grades 6–8. Although this sample enabled rich discussion and manageable group dynamics, it does not represent all school-aged children or out-of-school children (OOSC).
3. **Temporal and Institutional Constraints:** Data collection was limited to a specific period during the school calendar. The study captures a snapshot rather than longitudinal changes in children's perceptions.

Despite these constraints, the study remains valuable as an exploratory and interpretive inquiry that centers children's voices in defining their own well-being.

Delimitation of the study

The study's scope was intentionally delimited to maintain focus on children's voices and the school context. These delimitations ensured methodological clarity while preserving the study's focus on meaning-making, participation, and agency.

1. **Focus on Children's Perspectives:** The research centers exclusively on children's viewpoints, excluding parents, teachers, and community members. This aligns with the

study's epistemological stance that children are capable of articulating their own understandings of well-being.

2. **Educational Setting:** The study was conducted in school environments, recognizing schools as primary spaces for socialization and capability development.
3. **Capability Framework:** The 21-domain capability list used was derived from established literature (Biggeri, Walker, Nussbaum, Robeyns) and adapted contextually. It served as a reflective tool rather than an exhaustive or universal list.
4. **Cross-Sectional Design**: The study captures data at a single point in time and does not attempt to measure longitudinal change.
5. **Geographical Focus**: The research focuses on Bhojpur District as a case study to provide deep, contextual insights rather than national-level generalization.

Organization of the Study

The thesis is structured into five chapters.

- Chapter One introduces the study, outlining the background, problem statement, objectives, significance, and methodological boundaries.
- Chapter Two presents a critical literature review on child well-being and the Capability Approach, highlighting key theoretical and empirical insights.
- Chapter Three details the research methodology, including study design, sampling, data collection, and analysis procedures.
- Chapter Four presents and analyzes the findings, focusing on patterns of prioritization and meaning-making across gender, age, and grade.
- Chapter Five presents the conclusions drawn from the findings of the study.

Chapter II

Literature review

This section provides a structured overview of the theoretical and empirical literature underpinning this study on children's well-being, education, and the Capability Approach (CA). It introduces the CA, developed by Amartya Sen and expanded by Martha Nussbaum and others, as a framework that focuses on fundamental freedoms rather than resources or utility. The literature also examines how well-being has been conceptualized through multiple perspectives, hedonic, eudaimonic, objective, and subjective, emphasizing child-specific interpretations that recognize children as active agents in the present, not just future adults. The literature from Nepal and South Asia reveals strong Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) commitments but limited child-centered, participatory research. Overall, this section synthesizes these debates to underscore a key research gap: while the CA has informed global discussions on development and education, there is limited empirical work in Nepal that foregrounds children's own perspectives.

Well-Being: Concepts, Debates, and Measures

Competing Perspectives

The discourse surrounding well-being has been debated for millennia and has a multifaceted history, drawing from classical philosophical traditions, indigenous cultural practices, and contemporary social scientific research (Jarden & Roache, 2023). The central focus of this discourse is two dominant traditions: hedonic and eudaimonic perspectives. The hedonic tradition equates well-being with the presence of pleasure and the absence of pain, emphasizing subjective happiness as the ultimate good. Conversely, the eudaimonic tradition, rooted in Aristotelian philosophy, emphasizes the concepts of flourishing, meaningful existence, and the realization of human potential. This shift from a narrow focus on "happiness" to broader conceptions of well-being underscores the recognition of well-being as a prudential value, which refers to what makes a life go well for the individual living it (Alexandrova, 2017; Jarden & Roache, 2023).

Another key debate lies between objective and subjective accounts. The subjective approaches foreground how people feel and evaluate their own lives, often measured through life satisfaction, affect balance, or self-reports of happiness (Diener et al., 1999). While such measures capture personal experiences, they may fail to account for adaptive preferences, especially among marginalized groups who adjust their aspirations downward (Sen, 1999). Objective approaches, by contrast, emphasize external goods and conditions considered necessary for a good life, such as health, education, or rights, regardless of individual perceptions (Nussbaum, 2011). Both perspectives offer valuable insights, but both also have limitations: subjective measures risk overlooking structural deprivation, while objective lists risk imposing external values. This complexity is particularly salient when addressing the well-being of children, who are frequently marginalized in policy discussions. It is essential to recognize their unique lived experiences, as well as the structural and developmental contexts that inform their well-being (Biggeri, 2007; Domínguez-Serrano et al., 2019).

Philosophical Accounts of Well-Being

Philosophical debates further complicate the definition of well-being. According to Crisp (2017), three dominant theories structure the field: hedonism, desire theories, and objective list theories. Hedonism aligns with the hedonic perspective, while desire theories hold that well-being consists in the satisfaction of an individual's informed preferences. Objective list theories, by contrast, claim that certain goods, such as knowledge, friendship, or autonomy, contribute to well-being irrespective of desires or pleasure. This pluralism has fueled debates between welfarist views, which reduce well-being to a single value (e.g., utility), and pluralist accounts, which defend multidimensional conceptions (Jarden & Roache, 2023).

In the context of child well-being, these theoretical distinctions assume critical importance. The preferences of children are often shaped by limited awareness and adaptive expectations, which raises questions about the adequacy of desire theories as a measure of their well-being. Moreover, while hedonic states, such as happiness, hold significance, they may not encapsulate the developmental and relational dimensions inherent in childhood. In this regard, objective list theories emerge as a more robust framework, particularly when enriched by participatory methods that integrate children's voices and values into the assessment of their well-being (Peleg, 2013; Biggeri, 2007). Such an approach can effectively bridge normative considerations with empirical insights, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of what contributes to children's well-being.

Contemporary Science and Policy Usage

In recent decades, there has been a marked increase in scholarly interest surrounding the concept of well-being, spanning disciplines such as psychology, economics, education, and public policy (Jarden & Roache, 2023). The rise of positive psychology, especially Seligman's PERMA model (Positive emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, Achievement), has popularized a multidimensional but largely hedonic–eudaimonic hybrid. In public policy, subjective well-being measures such as life satisfaction surveys have become increasingly prominent, yet scholars caution against equating these with well-being itself (Alkire, 2005; Jarden & Roache, 2023). Well-being from a capability perspective cannot be reduced to reported satisfaction or individual happiness. As Alkire (2005) and Sen (1999) argue, this risks subverting the evaluative space by ignoring freedoms, agency, and structural conditions. Furthermore, empirical research highlights divergences between laypeople and academic definitions: while lay accounts often stress mental health, safety, and belonging, academic models privilege meaning, purpose, and functioning (Jarden & Roache, 2023). These discrepancies underscore the need for frameworks that are both theoretically rigorous and contextually grounded.

The Capability Approach: Theoretical Foundations

Origins and Development

The Capability Approach (CA) emerged as a radical rethinking of how well-being, poverty, and development should be conceptualized. Its origins lie in the critique of utilitarian and resource-based approaches, which tended to reduce well-being to either subjective utility (happiness, satisfaction) or to command over commodities and income. Amartya Sen's pioneering work shifted the evaluative focus from resources and subjective states to what people are effectively able to do and to be, their functionings, and the freedoms they have to choose among valued functionings, their capabilities (Sen, 1999). Sen argued that freedom should be understood both intrinsically, as constitutive of human flourishing, and instrumentally, as a means to achieve other valued goals (Sen, 1992; 1999). This conceptual shift was crucial because it opened an alternative space of evaluation, one that is plural, contextual, and sensitive to human diversity.

In addition to Sen's open-ended framework, Martha Nussbaum (2011) has proposed a more normative and prescriptive account of the Capabilities Approach. She delineates a list of ten central capabilities that she argues are essential thresholds of human dignity and justice, ranging from life and bodily health to emotions, play, and control over one's environment. Unlike Sen, who deliberately resisted formulating a fixed list to preserve contextual flexibility, Nussbaum insisted that a universal, politically defendable set of entitlements is necessary to protect vulnerable populations, particularly women and children, whose voices are often excluded from public reasoning. This distinction between Sen's procedural openness and Nussbaum's substantive list represents one of the foundational debates in the realm of CA.

Over time, scholars such as Ingrid Robeyns (2005, 2017) further clarified CA as a theoretical framework rather than a complete theory, outlining its essential features, evaluative space, and methodological criteria. Robeyns emphasized that CA is both normative, focused on what ought to be valued, and evaluative, used to assess well-being and inequality. Her work also clarified misconceptions, such as equating CA solely with Nussbaum's list or with human development indices, and stressed the importance of linking theory to empirical application.

In the domain of education, Melanie Walker (2006; 2012) and Mario Biggeri (2007) have made notable contributions to the capabilities approach (CA) by focusing on childhood and schooling. Walker articulated how CA can reconceptualize education as more than skill acquisition, framing it instead as an expansion of human freedom and agency. In contrast, Biggeri's research highlights the importance of developing child-specific capability lists through direct participatory engagement with children, thereby operationalizing CA in contexts where young individuals are empowered to define what constitutes valued beings and doings. This participatory approach resonates with the findings of Domínguez-Serrano et al. (2019), who advocate for the necessity of shifting away from adult-centric models when measuring children's well-being, acknowledging the importance of children's agency in identifying pertinent dimensions of their lives.

Similarly, Sabina Alkire (2005) adds another crucial layer, arguing that CA's value lies not only in its operational possibilities but also in its comprehensive philosophical reach. She warns that oversimplifying CA into narrow indicators risks losing its richness, much like how the "basic needs" approach of the 1970s was subverted into commodity checklists. Alkire emphasizes that while CA should inspire operational tools (such as the Human Development Index), its true strength lies in providing a general normative orientation toward expanding freedoms and capabilities.

The empirical work has since expanded CA across regions, including Africa, Asia, and Latin America, with diverse methodologies (e.g., structural equation modeling, participatory assessments). For instance, Sarr and Ba (2017) operationalized CA in Senegal, showing how basic capabilities like education and bodily health predict subjective well-being, while governance dimensions had mixed effects. Similarly, Wagle (2005) applied CA in Nepal using multidimensional poverty measures, highlighting the value of capabilities in assessing deprivation beyond income. These studies underscore the adaptability of CA while also demonstrating methodological challenges.

Thus, the origins and development of CA reveal both its philosophical breadth and empirical adaptability. From Sen's insistence on freedom and plural evaluation, through Nussbaum's normative list, to contemporary extensions by Robeyns, Walker, Biggeri, Alkire, and others, CA has become one of the most influential frameworks for analyzing well-being, justice, and education. In the context of this thesis, CA offers a child-sensitive and participatory evaluative lens, capable of capturing how children themselves understand their well-being in ways that go beyond conventional indicators.

Key Concepts

The Capability Approach (CA) centers around a set of interconnected concepts that redefine our understanding of well-being and justice. Key concepts within this framework include functionings, capabilities, agency, and the role of conversion factors. Each has been central to both theoretical debates and empirical applications, particularly in research involving children.

Functionings

In his seminal works, Sen (1992, 1999) conceptualizes functionings as the "beings and doings" that define the quality of individuals' lives. These functionings include various dimensions such as being nourished, receiving an education, engaging in community life, and experiencing self-respect. They encompass a spectrum of achievements, from fundamental aspects like the avoidance of premature mortality to more intricate accomplishments such as the ability to play, imagine, and cultivate meaningful relationships. Functionings are indicative of the realized outcomes within an individual's life, reflecting the actual states of being and actions that people value (Robeyns, 2005). For children, functioning often extends beyond mere survival and health; they also integrate vital aspects of social participation, play, and learning, domains that are integral to their holistic development and lived experiences (Biggeri, 2007; Domínguez-Serrano et al., 2019).

Capabilities

While functionings are achieved states, capabilities represent the real opportunities or freedoms to achieve those functionings (Sen, 1992). They are sets of possible lives that individuals could choose, given their circumstances. Nussbaum (2011) elaborates this by identifying central capabilities that should be protected as thresholds of justice, including life, health, emotions, play, and control over one's environment. For Sen, however, the value of capabilities lies in their openness: the relevant set must be determined through public reasoning, participation, and context. This distinction between achieved outcomes and genuine opportunity sets is particularly vital for children, whose ability to convert resources into well-being depends heavily on structural and social factors.

Agency

The Capability Approach (CA) underscores the concept of agency, defined as the ability to pursue goals one values and has reason to value, even when these goals transcend individual well-being (Sen, 1985). Agency encompasses the freedom to act as a catalyst for change within one's community, such as through advocacy for equity or assisting others. For children, agency is frequently limited by factors such as age, societal norms, and institutional regulations. However, empirical research reveals that when provided with the opportunity, children consistently express their aspirations, assert their voices, and actively engage in communal life (Biggeri et al., 2011; Walker, 2012).

Conversion Factors

A key aspect of the Capability Approach (CA) is its focus on conversion factors, which are the personal, social, and environmental conditions that mediate the transformation of resources into capabilities (Robeyns, 2005; Alkire, 2005). For instance, two children might possess the same resource, such as a textbook, but their ability to utilize it can differ significantly: one child may lack literacy skills (a personal factor), another might be hindered by household responsibilities (a social factor), and yet another could be unable to study in the evening due to a lack of electricity (an environmental factor). Acknowledging these conversion factors is particularly important in research centered on children since their opportunities are greatly affected by structural inequalities related to gender norms, caste, ethnicity, and rural location (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007; Domínguez-Serrano et al., 2019).

Well-Being, Freedom, and Achievement

Sen further distinguishes between well-being achievement, which is the functionings a child actually realizes, and well-being freedom, which is the range of capabilities available from which to choose (Sen, 1992). This dual lens is critical in child studies: a child may appear well-fed (achievement), but if she lacks any genuine choice in her diet, her capability set remains constrained. Conversely, children may aspire to valued functionings they cannot achieve due to conversion barriers. Research with children shows that their understanding of well-being often highlight this gap between aspiration and constrained opportunity (Domínguez-Serrano et al., 2019).

Children’s Well-Being: From Protection to Participation

Introduction to Children’s Well-Being

Child well-being has shifted from a narrow, survival-oriented concern to a multidimensional construct that encompasses physical, mental, social, and educational domains in children’s present lives as well as their futures (Domínguez-Serrano & del Moral-Espín, 2022). This reconceptualization has been propelled by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the New Sociology of Childhood, and bioecological perspectives that situate children within nested social systems (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; James & Prout, 1997, as reviewed in Domínguez-Serrano & del Moral-Espín, 2022). Within this evolving landscape, the Capability Approach (CA) offers a normative and analytical framework that centers real freedoms, “what children can actually be and do,” rather than inputs alone (Sen, 1985, 1992, 1999; Robeyns, 2017).

Historically, policy and research emphasized protection, keeping children safe from harm and ensuring minimum standards, often relegating their present voices to the background. Contemporary scholarship argues for complementing protection with participation, recognizing children as agents capable of contributing to definitions of their own well-being (Biggeri, 2007; Kellock, 2020). Article 12 of the CRC legitimizes children’s participation in matters affecting them; CA deepens this by treating children’s perspectives as evaluative inputs about the lives they have reason to value (Biggeri, 2007; Sen, 2004). In primary school contexts, participatory and creative methods (e.g., photo-voice, mapping, visual elicitation) have surfaced children's priorities, relationships, places, autonomy, and play, revealing that adult-defined categories routinely miss valued dimensions of school life (Kellock, 2020).

The Importance of Understanding Children's Perspectives on Well-Being

A central claim across the reviewed works is that children are credible evaluators of their own well-being and can meaningfully articulate valued capabilities when research designs are child-centered (Biggeri, 2007; Kellock, 2020; Domínguez-Serrano & del Moral-Espín, 2022). Bottom-up processes, surveys adapted for deliberation, focus groups, and creative tasks, help mitigate adaptive preferences and allow reflective reasoning about what matters (Biggeri, 2007). In Kellock's (2020) UK primary school study, nine themes emerged from children's own photographs and narratives, people (relationships), place/environment, physical activity, creativity, play, learning, autonomy/choice, rules/safety, and basic needs, and were explicitly theorized through CA and community psychology. The result is a present-focused, context-sensitive account of well-being that treats children not only as bearers of rights but as co-constructors of supportive school ecologies.

Limitations of Adult-Centric and Economistic Models

The reviewed literature is critical of approaches that infer well-being from resources, test scores, or adult proxies alone. Such adult-centric and economistic models risk obscuring conversion factors (e.g., school climate, autonomy support, safety) that determine whether resources become real freedoms, and they under-represent hedonic and eudaimonic dimensions such as belonging, play, and creativity (Domínguez-Serrano & del Moral-Espín, 2022; Kellock, 2020; Robeyns, 2017). In their systematic review, Domínguez-Serrano and del Moral-Espín (2022) document the predominance of European, quantitative studies and call for more Global South, participatory, and intersectional work that can surface culturally situated conceptions of a "good life." The CA's emphasis on well-being achievement (functionings) together with well-being freedom (capability sets) provides a corrective to one-dimensional metrics and adult-defined targets (Sen, 1992; Robeyns, 2017).

The Capability Approach differs from other frameworks of child well-being, such as rights-based or psychological models, because it moves beyond both legal entitlement and subjective feeling to focus on what children are actually able to be and do in their given contexts. The rights-based framework, such as that articulated in the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)*, grants children the legal *right to development* across several domains (physical, mental, social, spiritual, etc.). However, the UNCRC tends to interpret development as a *journey toward adulthood*, framing children primarily as "human becomings." This view protects children for their future potential rather than respecting their agency in the present. In contrast, the Capability Approach, following Sen (1999) and Nussbaum (2011), conceives development as *freedom*, the real opportunities to live the kind of life one values. It refuses to treat people as homogeneous; factors such as gender, age, and schooling are seen as *conversion factors* that shape individual capabilities. Claiming that children lack the capacity to choose contradicts the very principle of the Capability Approach, which defends the dignity and agency of all individuals, especially those marginalized by assumptions of incapacity. In my study, this framework allowed children in rural Nepal, often viewed through a deficit lens, to articulate well-being through what they value and aspire to, such as *love, respect, equality, and participation*. Thus, while rights-based models prescribe *what should be provided*, and psychological models measure *how children feel*, the Capability Approach explores *what children are genuinely free to do and* *become*, connecting rights, opportunities, and lived experiences into a single, holistic understanding of well-being.

Children's Well-Being in the Capability Approach

Within CA, well-being is assessed in terms of capabilities (substantive opportunities) and functionings (achieved doings/beings). For children, CA scholarship advances at least two refinements relevant to education and policy: evolving capabilities and the well-being–well-becoming nexus. Firstly, evolving capabilities acknowledge that agency, autonomy, and decision-making develop over time; therefore, a fair assessment must consider age-specific milestones and the support needed to foster genuine choices (Biggeri & Santi, 2012; referenced in Dominguez-Serrano & del Moral-Espin, 2022). Secondly, while the CA emphasizes current freedoms, some scholars suggest the importance of balancing present well-being (current flourishing) with future potential (well-becoming) to ensure that immediate opportunities do not compromise long-term development of capabilities (Peleg, 2019; Schweiger & Graf, 2015, in Domínguez-Serrano & del Moral-Espín, 2022). In educational settings, this means creating environments that both safeguard and empower students, such as supportive teaching methods, meaningful engagement, and safe, inspiring spaces, transforming educational resources into valuable outcomes (Kellock, 2020).

Empirical Evidence on Children's Conceptions of Well-Being

Empirical studies confirm that when asked directly, children consistently identify education, love and care, health, safety, play, social relations, respect, participation, autonomy over time, and mobility among their valued capabilities, with education repeatedly ranking at or near the top (Biggeri, 2007). In cross-context fieldwork (Italy, India, Uganda), Biggeri (2007) used surveys, FGDs, and case studies to elicit capabilities from children themselves, validating items if (a) at least one child named them spontaneously and (b) a majority judged them important. Across diverse samples, including street-involved and rehabilitated children, education, love and care, and life/physical health emerged as core, with education most frequently cited among the top three capabilities.

At the school level, Kellock (2020) shows that children's well-being is situational and relational: people and place anchor children's accounts, while autonomy/choice mediates whether school affordances translate into meaningful learning and positive affect. The systematic review by Domínguez-Serrano and del Moral-Espín (2022) synthesizes 37 CA-well-being studies and observes that education and school spaces dominate empirical applications; however, quantitative studies often miss children's lived meanings unless complemented by participatory or mixed methods. The review also highlights geographical imbalances (Global North bias) and underdeveloped intersectional analyses, gaps that motivate child-centered research in underrepresented contexts.

Operationalizing the Capability Approach for Children

Universal vs. Contextual Lists

A long-running debate about the necessity of a universal enumeration of central capabilities versus context-sensitive lists remains contentious. Sen (1992, 1999) articulates a deliberate resistance to the establishment of a fixed, canonical list, contending that the determination of pertinent capabilities constitutes a normative judgment that should emerge through public deliberation and should be adapted to specific purposes and contexts. In contrast, Nussbaum (2011) posits the need for a universal framework of central human capabilities, which she argues serves as a foundational political minimum for justice. This difference in perspective creates a dichotomy between Sen's and Nussbaum's conceptualizations. For Sen, conversion factors, social, personal, and environmental conditions that affect how people convert resources into functionings are crucial to understanding capabilities. Nussbaum's model, on the other hand, integrates these conversion factors within the concept of capabilities themselves, thus expanding the scope of what a capability entails. As a result, Nussbaum's approach is often better suited to discussions about moral philosophy, legal rights, and political declarations, whereas Sen's model, with its emphasis on context, is more applicable to socio-economic policy-making and the measurement of individual well-being (Robeyns, 2003). Robeyns suggests that to create contextual lists that maintain normative strength, certain procedural criteria should be adhered to. These criteria include explicit selection, a strong theoretical foundation, empirical support, a non-reductive approach, and the involvement of those affected to avoid paternalistic practices (Robeyns, 2005/2017; Alkire, 2005). In the context of child research, this entails integrating theory-driven domains (such as health, play, and social connections) with participatory methods that reflect what children locally consider important, along with ensuring the transparency of the selection process.

Capability Lists and Domains for Children & Education

Child- and school-focused capability approach (CA) research expands the understanding of educational success beyond traditional test scores by emphasizing agency, participation, relationships, and school processes. Biggeri et al. (2012) introduce the concept of children's evolving capabilities and how these capabilities change over time as functionings inform freedoms. They argue that fostering agency, which includes giving children a voice in decision-making processes, is crucial and should be nurtured from a young age (Ballet et al., 2011). Biggeri and Santi (2012) contend that conventional achievement-based educational systems overlook capabilities vital for democratic engagement, such as critical, creative, and caring thinking. They propose the Philosophy for Children (P4C) framework and the Community of Inquiry as pedagogical approaches that facilitate the development of practical reason, dialogic agency, affiliation, and responsibility. This perspective positions education not merely as a mechanism for achieving high scores but as a means to cultivate capable democratic agents (Walker, 2010; Walker & Unterhalter, 2007). Anand and Sen's (1994, 2000) work on human development lays the foundation for the Human Development Index (HDI), which incorporates longevity, knowledge, and standard of living as indicators of well-being. Comparatively, Rawls's concept of "primary goods," including rights, liberties, and opportunities, serves as a useful framework that underscores CA's insistence on what individuals are effectively able to be and do, given diverse conversion factors. This is particularly relevant for children, whose age and dependency, as well as the structure of schools, influence their capability conversions (Sen, 1992; Nussbaum, 2011; Alkire, 2005). Alkire and others stress that any capability list, whether universal or contextual, should be safeguarded against reduction to mere commodities. It should inherently promote freedom, agency, and participation (Alkire, 2005).

Martha Nussbaum's Central Human Capabilities

Nussbaum's list, a more structured iteration, outlines ten central human capabilities that she argues are universally essential for a life of dignity. These include life, bodily health, bodily integrity, senses, imagination and thought, emotions, practical reason, affiliation, other species, play, and control over one's environment. Her emphasis on emotions, imagination, and affiliation resonates strongly with the developmental needs of children.

Table 2.1 Martha Nussbaum's List: Central Human Capabilities

Martha Nussbaum's list: Central Human Capabilities
Life
Bodily Health
Bodily integrity
Senses, Imagination, and Thought
Emotions
Practical Reason
Affiliation
Other Species
Play
Control over one's Environment

Source: Nussbaum, M. C. (2000). Women and human development: the capabilities approach. Cambridge University Press. Page 78

Mario Biggeri's List for Children

Biggeri's contribution focuses specifically on children, expanding the CA to address their unique needs. His list includes life and physical health, love and care, mental well-being, bodily integrity and safety, social relations, participation, education, and freedom from economic and non-economic exploitation. This list is particularly relevant for educational settings as it highlights the importance of nurturing both physical and emotional well-being while protecting children from exploitation. Biggeri adapts the CA to focus on children's unique needs, emphasizing both physical and emotional well-being, and the importance of education and participation.

Table 2.2 Mario Biggeri Capability list for Children

Mario Biggeri List
Life and physical health
Love and care
Mental well-being
Bodily integrity and safety
Mobility
Social relations
Participation
Education
Freedom from economic and non-economic exploitation
Shelter and environment

Leisure activities
Respect
Religion and identity
Time-autonomy

Source: Biggeri (2004)

Ingrid Robeyns' Gendered Approach

Robeyns (2003) adapts the CA to gender inequality, proposing a list focusing on life and physical health, mental well-being, political empowerment, and respect. This framework helps address disparities in education and social empowerment for children, particularly girls, offering a pathway for schools to integrate gender-sensitive policies. Robeyns' gendered approach addresses inequality, offering a capability list that emphasizes empowerment, health, and education, with attention to gender-sensitive policies.

Table 2.3 Ingrid Robeyn's Capability List

Ingrid Robeyn's List
Life and physical health
Mental well-being
Bodily integrity and healthcare use
Social relations
Political empowerment
Education and Knowledge
Domestic work and nonmarket care
Paid work and other projects
Shelter and environment
Mobility
Leisure activities
Time-autonomy
Respect
Religion
Life and physical health

Source: Robeyn's 2003

Melanie Walker Gender Equality List

Walker's list focuses on educational resilience and well-being, aiming to create environments where students' emotional and social development is prioritized alongside learning. Walker's emphasis on educational resilience and social relations has implications for children's capabilities in primary and secondary education. It encourages an environment where students' emotional and social well-being is considered alongside their academic progress.

Table 2.4 Melanie Walker List

Melanie Walker List
Independent and critical thought, critical thinking, reasoning, reflection, learner agency, and responsibility for their learning (a thin personal autonomy)
Knowledge of values, citizenship, and contribution to economic development
Bodily integrity and health, safety at school, no corporal punishment, freedom from sexual harassment and violence, choice in sexual relationships, protection against HIV
Respect for self, for others, for other cultures, and being treated with dignity (a form of social relations)

Source: Melanie Walker (2007)

Debates and Recurring Domains

The various lists of capabilities, while differing in their specifics, share several recurring domains. When considered as a whole, these insights point to a consistent set of capabilities for children in school, which generally encompasses: learning and knowledge acquisition, physical health and safety, opportunities for play and leisure, building relationships and social connections, maintaining respect and dignity, exercising voice and participation, fostering imagination and creativity, and having faith in just processes and governance. These recurring lists reflect a broad consensus on what constitutes essential components of individual well-being. However, debates persist regarding prioritizing these domains, particularly in different cultural contexts. The factors related to gender equality and social identity, such as caste, ethnicity, and language, are considered conversion factors that influence all other areas of capability development (Biggeri & Santi, 2012; Nussbaum, 2011; Walker & Unterhalter, 2007).

Capability List for Children's Well-Being: Mapping to This Study

The proposed capability list builds upon the established capability lists developed by Nussbaum, Robeyns, Walker, and Biggeri. Following Sen's (1999) principle of open and reasoned selection and Robeyns's (2005) criteria for contextual robustness, the list integrates capability domains that recur across literature while reflecting the lived realities of rural, school-going children in Nepal. It represents essential dimensions of children's holistic development and well-being, encompassing both universal values and context-specific experience. The twenty-one capability domains were developed as a reflective framework for dialogue with children. These domains were not presented as fixed or predefined categories but as prompts to facilitate children's own interpretations of what each capability meant in their lives. The intention was not to impose adult-defined meanings but to provide an open structure through which children could express, discuss, and redefine the components of their well-being.

1. Life/Physical Health
2. Religion and Identity
3. Love and Care
4. Mental Well-being
5. Participation
6. Education
7. Bodily Integrity

8. Social Relations
9. Freedom from Economic/Non-Economic Exploitation
10. Respect
11. Leisure Activities
12. Nutritional Well-being
13. Mobility
14. Spirituality
15. Understand and Interpret
16. Time Autonomy
17. Plan/Imagine and Think
18. Aspiration
19. Shelter and Environment
20. Personal Autonomy
21. Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Curriculum

Subjective Data & Child Voice

Children's subjective reports on safety, respect, autonomy, belonging, and life satisfaction are essential supplements to objective indicators within a Capability Approach (CA) for three main reasons. First, these reports reflect personal experiences of freedom and process quality (like having a voice and being recognized), which are crucial for democratic agency but not effectively captured by administrative data (Biggeri & Santi, 2012). Second, they correspond with a more nuanced understanding of well-being, defined as "how well life is going for the person" rather than just the resources available to them (Crisp, 2021). Third, emerging psychometric research indicates that some key subjective indicators, such as life satisfaction, can be reliably compared across different groups (like gender, age, ethnicity, and national background), allowing for careful cross-group comparisons when measured correctly (as noted in Jarden & Roache, 2023, referencing Joshanloo's work). However, the literature advises against equating subjective well-being with overall well-being (Jarden & Roache, 2023; Crisp, 2021). Understandings of "well-being" can differ culturally and personally (for instance, concepts like inner peace, feeling appreciated, or work-life balance), and the priorities of adolescents (such as fun and safety) often contrast with those of adults (who may prioritize meaning) (Jarden & Roache, 2023).

Therefore, a CA-aligned approach should involve (i) collaboratively defining capability areas with children (participatory elicitation), (ii) measuring both actual achievements and perceived freedoms/processes, and (iii) including a select few robust subjective outcomes (like life satisfaction and positive feelings) that are clearly seen as results of environments that enable capabilities, rather than capturing the entirety of well-being. This strategy helps guard against two potential pitfalls highlighted by Alkire (2005): oversimplifying the Capability Approach into a narrow set of outcomes and mis-specifying it by neglecting agency and public reasoning.

Education, Schooling, and Capabilities

Education as Capability and Converter

The Capability Approach provides a framework for rethinking education as both an intrinsic and instrumental dimension of human development. It moves beyond human capital perspectives by situating education within broader concerns of equity, inclusion, and justice (Walker, 2006). Walker emphasizes that capability-informed educational practices can address diverse learner needs and expand individual freedoms and agency. Similarly, Terzi (2007) underscores its implications for inclusive education, particularly for learners with disabilities, arguing that true inclusion requires not only access but also the substantive capability to be educated meaningfully.

Terzi (2003) identifies education as a basic capability essential for human flourishing. The absence of educational opportunities restricts individuals' ability to live fulfilling lives, while access to meaningful education enables the expansion of other capabilities. This aligns with Sen's (1992) notion of basic capabilities as foundational to well-being. Terzi further contends that education is not merely a means to economic productivity but a constitutive element of freedom, enabling informed choice and self-determination (Alkire, 2002). Flores-Crespo (2004) similarly advocates for a liberal education that nurtures critical thinking, autonomy, and empathy, qualities central to human capability expansion.

Within the Capability Approach, education assumes a dual role: it is both a capability in itself and a conversion factor that facilitates the realization of other capabilities. Sen (1999) notes that education enhances intrinsic freedoms such as reasoning and participation, as well as instrumental freedoms related to employment, mobility, and political engagement. Nussbaum's (2011) central human capabilities, particularly senses, imagination, thought, and practical reason, also depend on educational opportunities for their development.

As a conversion factor, education mediates how resources translate into substantive freedoms (Robeyns, 2005). For instance, the presence of textbooks or classrooms alone does not guarantee learning; without inclusive pedagogy, linguistic accessibility, or gender-sensitive support, students may still lack the real freedom to learn. Thus, education operates both as a direct capability and a structural enabler of domains such as participation, mobility, and aspiration. For children, this dual role is especially critical. Educational experiences influence their immediate well-being through belonging, confidence, and friendship, while shaping their long-term agency and life trajectories. Yet, persistent inequalities based on gender, caste, ethnicity, and geography continue to constrain how effectively education translates into real freedoms and achieved functionings (Biggeri & Santi, 2012; Walker, 2006).

Schools as Enabling/Constraining Spaces

Schools are not neutral environments; they can either expand or limit capabilities based on their structures, norms, and governance. Research on the Capability Approach (CA) in education underscores that schooling should be assessed not only by academic outcomes but also by the freedoms it provides children to participate, deliberate, and envision their futures (Walker, 2006; Robeyns, 2006). The role of pedagogical practices is pivotal. Traditional systems that emphasize rote learning and rigid assessments may inhibit capabilities such as voice, critical thinking, and autonomy. In contrast, dialogical pedagogies like Philosophy for Children (P4C) or the Community of Inquiry actively promote critical, creative, and empathetic thinking, empowering children to deliberate, imagine alternatives, and view themselves as agents (Biggeri & Santi, 2012).

These methods align with the CA's emphasis on agency, treating children as active participants in their education rather than passive recipients of knowledge. Additionally, school climate and governance are crucial. Democratic participation in school councils, equitable treatment by teachers, and mechanisms for accountability enhance the process freedoms that elevate children's dignity and respect (Walker, 2006). On the other hand, discriminatory practices or authoritarian disciplinary measures diminish children's perceived agency, even when material resources are sufficient. Therefore, schools must be examined as spaces of both opportunity and constraint, where conversion factors such as gender norms, teacher biases, and school resources directly impact children's capability sets (Biggeri et al., 2007).

Non-Institutional Supports & Governance

In addition to formal education, children's abilities are significantly influenced by non-institutional factors such as family dynamics, peer relationships, and community organizations, along with overarching governance structures. While social connections can enhance resilience and a sense of belonging, they may not effectively lead to broader agency without appropriate institutional frameworks (Robeyns, 2005).

Research grounded in the Capability Approach (CA) has demonstrated that governance plays a crucial role in determining well-being. For instance, structural models from Senegal indicate that effective governance, characterized by institutional trust, equitable regulations, and accountability, strongly correlates with children's life satisfaction. In contrast, the impact of non-institutional support, such as assistance from family or community, appears to have more limited effects (Anand & Sen, 2000a; Alkire, 2005). This implies that while interpersonal support is important for immediate well-being, robust institutional systems, including the governance of educational settings, are essential for the sustainable enhancement of capabilities on a larger scale.

This perspective is particularly pertinent to the educational context in Nepal. Schools located in rural regions function at the crossroads of state policies and community expectations, where factors such as participatory governance, accountability, and the inclusion of children's voices are critical in determining whether educational resources genuinely expand individual freedoms. Consequently, it is essential to assess schools not merely as venues for instruction but also as governance spaces where children's dignity, participation, and ambitions may either be encouraged or limited.

Children's Well-Being and Education in Nepal/South Asia

Children's well-being and education in South Asia are shaped by multidimensional inequalities linked to poverty, gender, caste/ethnicity, and geography. Despite global and regional progress in school enrolment, disparities remain stark in terms of quality, access, and outcomes (UNESCO, 2015; UNICEF, 2019). In Nepal, national surveys show that children from Dalit, Janajati, and rural households are more likely to be deprived in multiple well-being dimensions, including education, nutrition, and safe housing (NPC & UNICEF, 2017).

Education plays a dual role as both a capability domain and a conversion factor: it enhances children's agency, voice, and aspirations, while also being instrumental for other capabilities such as mobility, participation, and autonomy (Walker, 2006; Biggeri & Santi, 2012). However, structural inequalities persist. Girls in particular face cultural and institutional barriers to sustained schooling, especially as they reach adolescence. For example, gender norms around household labor, mobility restrictions, and early marriage disproportionately curtail girls' opportunities from Grade 6 onwards (Bhatta, 2011; Nussbaum, 2011).

At the regional level, multidimensional poverty indices demonstrate that children in South Asia remain disproportionately deprived compared to adults (Alkire & Roche, 2012). Deprivations often cluster, meaning children simultaneously lack education, nutrition, sanitation, and security, which collectively undermine their capability development (Wolff & De-Shalit, 2007). Policy responses in Nepal have emphasized Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) frameworks to address these disparities. The Constitution of Nepal (2015) guarantees the right to free basic education, and the School Sector Development Plan (2022–2032) identifies equity, inclusion, and quality as cross-cutting goals. Yet implementation remains uneven, particularly in remote districts like Bhojpur, where infrastructural deficits, teacher shortages, and poor governance limit real opportunities for children.

Children's well-being in South Asia has also been studied through subjective well-being measures, with evidence suggesting differences by age and gender. Adolescents tend to shift from prioritizing play and care in earlier schooling years to aspirations, autonomy, and participation as they approach secondary school (Domínguez-Serrano et al., 2019). Such variation underscores the importance of recognizing developmental stages in understanding children's priorities and well-being outcomes.

Despite this growing body of evidence, several gaps remain. First, most research in Nepal and South Asia still treats children's well-being through resource- or outcome-based indicators (e.g., enrolment rates, exam performance, nutrition scores), rather than exploring children's own perspectives on what constitutes a good life (Bessell, 2015; Peleg, 2013). This adult-centric framing obscures children's agency and voice in defining and pursuing valued capabilities. Second, while GESI has become a policy priority, there is limited empirical work that examines how school climate, governance, and participation structures enable or constrain children's capabilities. The majority of evaluations emphasize infrastructure provision or gender parity in enrolment, but give little attention to whether schools foster dignity, respect, critical thinking, and meaningful participation (Biggeri & Santi, 2012; Walker, 2006).

Third, participatory Capability Approach (CA) studies with children are rare in Nepal. While international examples demonstrate how children can articulate, rank, and debate valued capabilities (Biggeri, 2007; Domínguez-Serrano et al., 2019), such approaches have yet to be systematically applied in rural Nepali schools. The few existing studies remain small-scale or limited to urban settings, without disaggregating by gender, grade, or age group. This absence is significant because early adolescents (Grades 6–8) are at a formative stage in which capabilities related to aspirations, autonomy, and participation evolve rapidly, but are also most vulnerable to social constraints such as gendered norms and caste-based discrimination. Without capturing children's voices at this stage, policies risk reproducing adult assumptions about what matters for well-being. There is limited evidence on how conversion factors, such as teacher behavior, peer relations, or governance, mediate the transformation of educational resources into capabilities in the Nepali context. This thin treatment of agency, voice, and institutional quality leaves a gap that this study directly addresses by combining participatory methods (capability ranking and meaning-making) with attention to variation across gender, grade, and age.

Conceptual Framework for This Study

This conceptual framework for this study is anchored in the Capability Approach (CA) (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2000; Robeyns, 2005; Alkire, 2005), which conceptualizes well-being as the substantive freedoms people have to be and do what they value. Within this theoretical frame, children are understood not as passive beneficiaries of adult-defined welfare, but as active agents whose perceptions and aspirations reveal how freedoms and constraints operate in their lives. The approach is therefore both normative and empirical: it allows the study to ask what children themselves consider valuable, and how their social context enables or restricts those opportunities.

The conceptual and analytical framework for this study integrates three interrelated dimensions that directly correspond to its objectives:

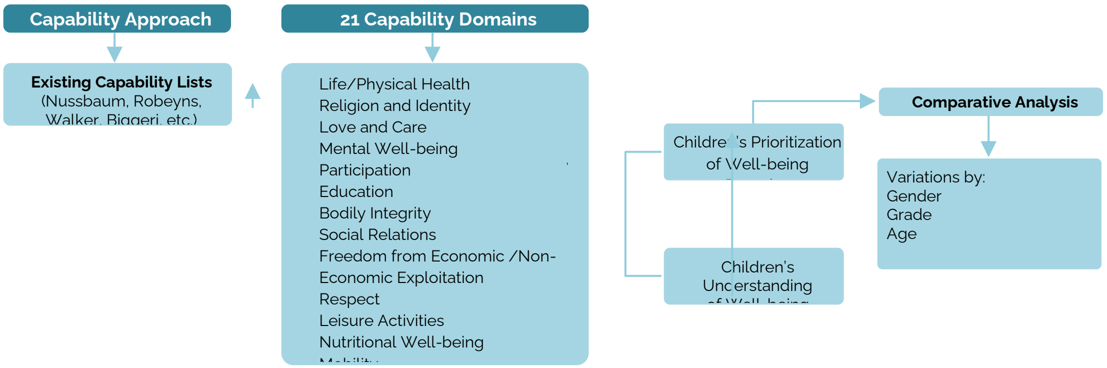
(1) children's prioritization of capability domains,
(2) their understanding of well-being, and
(3) variations across factors such as gender, age, and grade level.

The first dimension, children's prioritization of capabilities, focuses on how children ranked the relative importance of twenty-one capability domains on a ten-point scale. This ranking provides a comparative understanding of which aspects of life children consider most vital for their well-being. It reflects the evaluative pluralism central to the Capability Approach, recognizing that individuals, even within similar environments, attach different degrees of importance to specific freedoms. The ranking exercise generates structured data that reveals overall and group-based patterns of value, thereby illustrating what children value most strongly in their pursuit of well-being. The integration of this quantitative exercise within a participatory context allows for both measurement and reflection, offering a basis for subsequent interpretation of the meanings attached to these priorities.

The second dimension, children's understanding of well-being, examines how children define, interpret, and explain what it means to live well in their own words. Through the participatory capability booklet containing twenty-one pre-identified domains derived from existing literature, children provided written examples and explanations that linked each capability to their daily experiences. This process captures how children translate abstract dimensions of well-being, such as love, respect, autonomy, participation, or education, into concrete functionings that reflect their lived realities. This dimension embodies the Capability Approach's emphasis on reasoned agency and contextual interpretation, privileging children's voices over adult-centric or externally imposed indicators of success.

The third dimension variations across factors consider how gender, age, and grade influence children's understanding and priorities. In the CA, conversion factors (Sen, 1992; Robeyns, 2005) refer to personal, social, and environmental circumstances that mediate the transformation of resources or opportunities into real capabilities. In this study, they provide an analytical lens for understanding diversity within children's perspectives. For example, age may correspond with developmental maturity and changing aspirations; gender may shape experiences of freedom, mobility, and social expectation; and grade level may influence educational exposure and self-perception. These factors are not treated as the primary focus but as interpretive variables that help explain variation in how children understand and rank the elements of a good life.

Figure 2.1 Conceptual framework of the study


Capability Approach
Existing Capability Lists
(Nussbaum, Robeyns,
Walker, Biggeri, etc.)
21 Capability Domains
Life/Physical Health
Religion and Identity
Love and Care
Mental Well-being
Participation
Education
Bodily Integrity
Social Relations
Freedom from Economic /Non-
Economic Exploitation
Respect
Leisure Activities
Nutritional Well-being
Children's Prioritization
of Well-being
Children's
Understanding
Comparative Analysis
Variations by:
Gender
Grade
Age

The capability domains employed in this study were adapted from established Capability Approach (CA) literature and prior research conducted in Bhojpur District, Nepal, by the LIKE Lab (Learning, Innovation and Knowledge Exchange Lab) at Kathmandu University School of Arts. While grounded in global CA discourse, the domains were carefully contextualized to reflect the socio-cultural realities of Nepali children. The development process drew upon multiple theoretical and empirical sources: Nussbaum's (2000) list of central human capabilities, Robeyns' (2003, 2005) methodological guidelines for context-specific capability selection, Walker's (2006) work on educational capabilities, and Biggeri and colleagues' (2006, 2011) participatory studies on children's capabilities. Insights from Domínguez-Serrano et al. (2019) on child well-being, Alkire (2005) on operationalizing capabilities, and Ballet, Biggeri, and Comim (2011) on evolving and collective capabilities further informed the list, along with earlier contributions by Anand and Sen (1994) on basic features of well-being. Building on these foundational works, this study finalized a list of twenty-one capability domains that children could meaningfully engage with. *These include: Life and Physical Health; Religion and Identity; Love and Care; Mental Well-being; Participation; Education; Bodily Integrity; Social Relations; Freedom from Economic and Non-Economic Exploitation; Respect; Leisure Activities; Nutritional Well-being; Mobility; Spirituality; Understand & Interpret; Time Autonomy; Planning, Imagination and Thinking; Aspiration; Shelter and Environment; Personal Autonomy; and Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Curriculum.*

Analytically, the framework progresses from theory to empirical interpretation through four stages. It begins with theoretical grounding in the Capability Approach and existing capability lists, establishing the normative foundation for what constitutes well-being. It then moves to child-centred inquiry, where the 21 domains serve as prompts for children's definitions and evaluations. The third stage involves comparative analysis, where children's rankings reveal patterns of prioritization. Finally, the analysis incorporates conversion factors, gender, age, and grade, to interpret variation and contextual nuance within children's responses. Together, these stages form an iterative flow from conceptual grounding to participatory data generation to comparative and contextual interpretation.

In essence, this conceptual and analytical framework positions children as co-constructors of knowledge about their well-being. It extends the Capability Approach to capture both value pluralism and contextual diversity, grounding the analysis in children's own interpretations rather than externally imposed standards. By attending to variation across gender, age, and grade, it also illustrates how structural and social differences mediate children's capability formation. The framework thus moves from established CA theory to a localized, participatory articulation of well-being, grounded in children's voices, experiences, and aspirations.

Chapter III

Research methodology

This section provides a detailed outline of the research design, field site selection, participant demographics, data collection methods, and data analysis techniques, guided by the Capability Approach (CA) framework.

Research Approach and Design

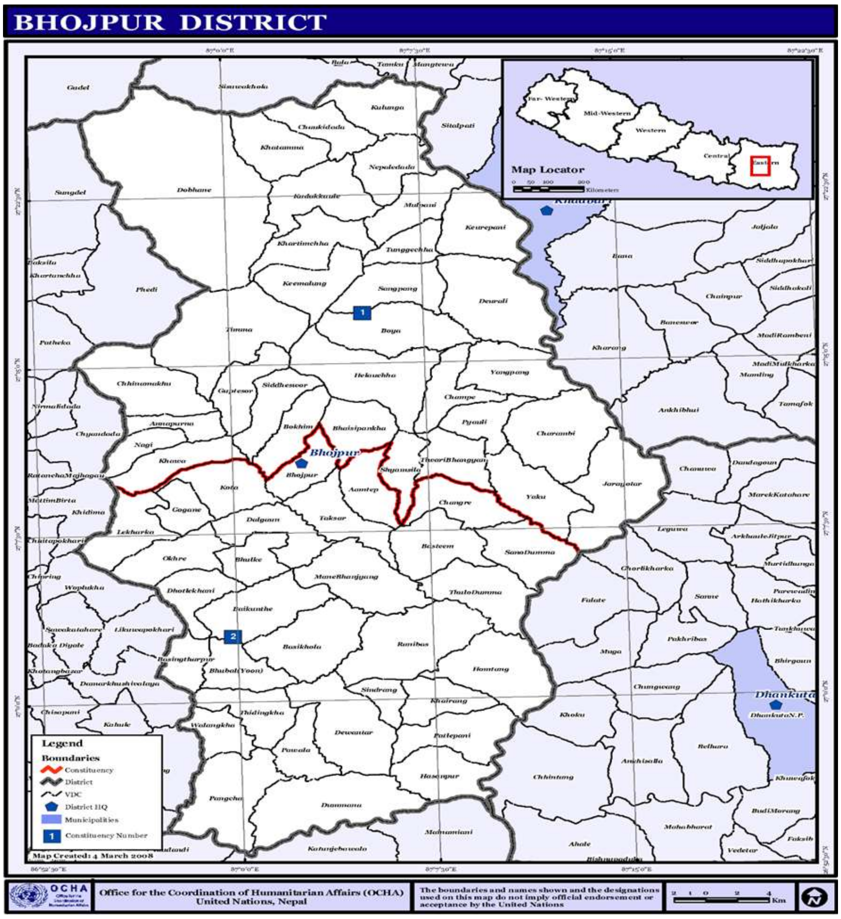
This study employed a convergent mixed-methods design, integrating qualitative and quantitative approaches to investigate how children perceive, prioritize, and experience well-being. This approach is chosen to understand children's lived experiences and conceptualizations of well-being and valued capabilities in their own words. The design enabled the researcher first to collect structured quantitative data to identify patterns of prioritization, followed by qualitative data to explore the understanding underlying these patterns. This design effectively examines complex, context-specific phenomena, allowing for an in-depth exploration of participants' perspectives and their prioritization of various capabilities.

The study uses a child-centered and participatory approach to data collection, including structured participatory tools, a capability booklet exercise, and follow-up group discussions. This method provides both quantifiable patterns of prioritization and rich qualitative insights into the children's meaning-making processes. Observation and field notes further enhance the contextual understanding of the findings.

Description of field site

The research was conducted in the Bhojpur District of Eastern Nepal. This district is characterized by a remote, hilly geography and limited infrastructure, which often restricts children's access to resources and opportunities. Bhojpur is also marked by rich ethnic diversity and social stratification, making it an ideal setting to explore how social, cultural, and economic factors shape children's understandings of well-being. Within the district, five community schools were selected to capture variation in context, including differences in ethnic composition, school resources, and local practices. This site selection ensures that the findings are grounded in the realities of rural community schools where policy-practice gaps are most pronounced.

Figure 3.1 Maps of Bhojpur district, Nepal


BHOJPUR DISTRICT
Map Locator
Far-Western
Mid-Western
Western
Central
Eastern
Bhojpur
Dhankuta
Khandbari
Legend
Boundaries
Constituency
District
VDC
District HQ
Municipalities
Constituency Number
1
2
Map Created: 4 March 2008
OCHA
Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)
United Nations, Nepal
The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations
Km

Source: OCHA Nepal

Duration of the study

The fieldwork was carried out between July and November 2025. The overall process included preliminary visits for rapport-building followed by data collection, observation, and note-taking across the five schools. Data cleaning, transcription, and thematic analysis were conducted progressively during this period.

Participants and Sampling Strategy

The study engaged 56 children from Grades 6, 7, and 8 across five community schools. A stratified purposive sampling technique was adopted to ensure balanced representation by gender and grade. The twelve children from each school (four per grade, equally divided between boys and girls) were selected in consultation with teachers to ensure diversity while maintaining feasibility. However, in one school, due to smaller enrolment and gender imbalance, only eight students participated. The demographic attributes of the participants included in the study are presented in the table below.

Gender of the Respondents

The study engaged 46.4% boys and 53.6%. This was critical to exploring gender-specific perceptions of well-being and experiences within the educational context.

Table 3.1 Gender of the Respondents

Gender	Count	Percentage (%)
Male	26	46.4%
Female	30	53.6%
Total	**56**	**100**

Source, Field 2025

Grade of the Respondents

The study engaged children enrolled in Grades 6, 7 & 8 aged between 10 and 16, who are in early adolescence, a crucial phase of transition from childhood to teenage years. During this period, they undergo significant physical, emotional, and social changes that shape their perception of well-being. Studying this age group is essential to capture these developmental dynamics and gain insights into how early adolescents perceive and internalize well-being.

Table 3.2 Grade of the Respondents

Grades	Count (n)	Percentage(%)
6	20	35.70%
7	19	33.90%
8	7	30.40%
Total	**56**	**100**

Source, Field 2025

Age of the Respondents

This composition ensured the inclusion of early and middle adolescents, whose developmental stages shape their understanding and expression of well-being.

Table 3.3 Age of the Respondents

Age Group	Count (n)	Percentage (%)
10–13 years	45	80.4
14–16 years	11	19.6
Total	56	100

Source, Field 2025

Data Collection Method

Data were collected using a two-section booklet and group discussions, observation, and field notes.

Instrument Development: Capability Booklet

The Capability Booklet served as the primary tool for data collection. It was adapted from participatory outputs created by the LIKE Lab (Learning, Innovation, and Knowledge Exchange Lab) at Kathmandu University School of Arts. Drawing on existing capability lists for children (Biggeri et al., 2006; Walker, 2006; Nussbaum, 2011; Robeyns, 2003) and previous participatory fieldwork in Nepal, the booklet featured twenty-one capability domains. The twenty-one capability domains were not introduced as a fixed framework but as an open and reflective tool to facilitate discussion and meaning-making. Children were encouraged to question, add to, or reinterpret the listed domains according to their own understanding of well-being. This booklet invited children to (1) rate the importance of each capability for their well-being and (2) give examples of each capability in their own words.

Section 1: Importance Ranking (Prioritization)

Children rated the importance of each capability on a scale from 1 (least important) to 10 (most important). This provided quantitative data reflecting how children prioritize different aspects of well-being.

Section 2: Meaning-Making (Understanding)

In the second section, children provided examples of what each capability meant to them and how it appeared in their daily lives. This generated rich qualitative data revealing their interpretations and lived experiences.

Group Discussions

After completing the booklet, mixed-gender group discussions were facilitated with the same people in each school. Discussions helped clarify any confusing terms, encouraged children to reflect on missing domains, and generated collective interpretations of well-being. These sessions also created a safe and participatory environment, ensuring that children's voices were heard interactively rather than only in written form.

Observation and Field Notes

The researcher maintained detailed field notes throughout the study to record classroom and school interactions, peer dynamics, and contextual observations. These notes complemented the children's self-reports, enabling triangulation and deeper contextual understanding.

Data Analysis Procedures

Data analysis followed a two-step approach:

Descriptive aggregation of rankings

Quantitative data from Section 1 were compiled into tables and summarized to illustrate overall patterns of capability prioritization and variation across participants. Mean scores were used instead of raw totals to allow proportional comparison across groups of different sizes. The analysis was conducted at four levels: overall (n = 56), by gender (boys n = 26; girls n = 30), by grade (6, 7, and 8), and by age group (Early 10–13, and Late 14–16). These comparisons show differences in how children value various capabilities across demographic and developmental categories.

Thematic analysis

Qualitative data from Section 2, group discussions, and field notes were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis. Children's written understanding and spoken narratives were coded inductively to identify recurring ideas, examples, metaphors, and expressions of how they understand and conceptualize their well-being. Themes were compared across gender, grade, and age groups to explore how social and developmental factors (conversion factors) may shape children's interpretations and valuation of each capability.

Ethical Considerations

In qualitative research, especially when involving children, ethical considerations are very important. This study will adhere to the following ethical principles.

1. **Informed Consent**: The researcher obtained consent from respondents prior to participation, ensuring that all participants are aware of the research purpose and nature.
2. **Confidentiality:** The researcher will protect the identities of participants, and all data will be anonymized to ensure privacy.
3. **Non-harm:** The research will be conducted in a manner that minimizes potential distress or discomfort for all participants.
4. **Cultural Sensitivity:** The research will be conducted with respect for local customs and traditions, ensuring that our methods and interactions are culturally suitable.

Chapter IV

Findings & Analysis

This chapter presents the main findings of the study, combining both quantitative and qualitative analyses to explore how children in Bhojpur District define and value their well-being. It is organized into three major sections: (a) children's prioritization of capability domains, (b) their understanding of well-being in their own words, and (c) an integration of both strands to interpret convergences and divergences. The results are further disaggregated by grade, gender, and age to examine how these factors shape children's perceptions and priorities.

Children's Prioritization of Well-Being Domains

This section presents the results of the ranking exercise in which children rated the importance of twenty-one capability domains on a scale from 1 to 10. The analysis identifies which domains children value most and least, thereby offering insights into their collective and subgroup priorities.

Children's Overall Prioritization of Well-Being Domains

The radar chart representing 21 capability domains illustrates how children collectively conceptualize what matters most for their well-being and development. The chart displays a nearly circular but subtly uneven pattern, showing that children considered all domains important, though some dimensions extend more prominently toward the outer edges. This configuration suggests a holistic and inclusive understanding of well-being, where relational, educational, and moral aspects take precedence over structural or autonomy-related factors.

The most prominent peaks in the radar chart appear around "Love and Care" and "Education", indicating that affectionate relationships, kindness, and emotional security are perceived as the foundation of a good life, while education is seen as the key pathway to growth and future opportunities. "Respect" follows closely, forming a strong cluster with Love and Care and Education. This shows that dignity, mutual recognition, and good relationships with peers and elders are central to children's moral and social world. This pattern resonates with Walker's (2015) argument that respect is a moral and relational good within educational spaces that sustains participation and self-esteem. The neighboring extensions on "Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Curriculum", "Participation", and "Nutritional Well-being" further reinforce that children value fairness, inclusion, and health as essential for thriving in both school and community life. These domains reflect the view that well-being depends on both emotional connection and practical opportunities to be heard, nourished, and treated equally.

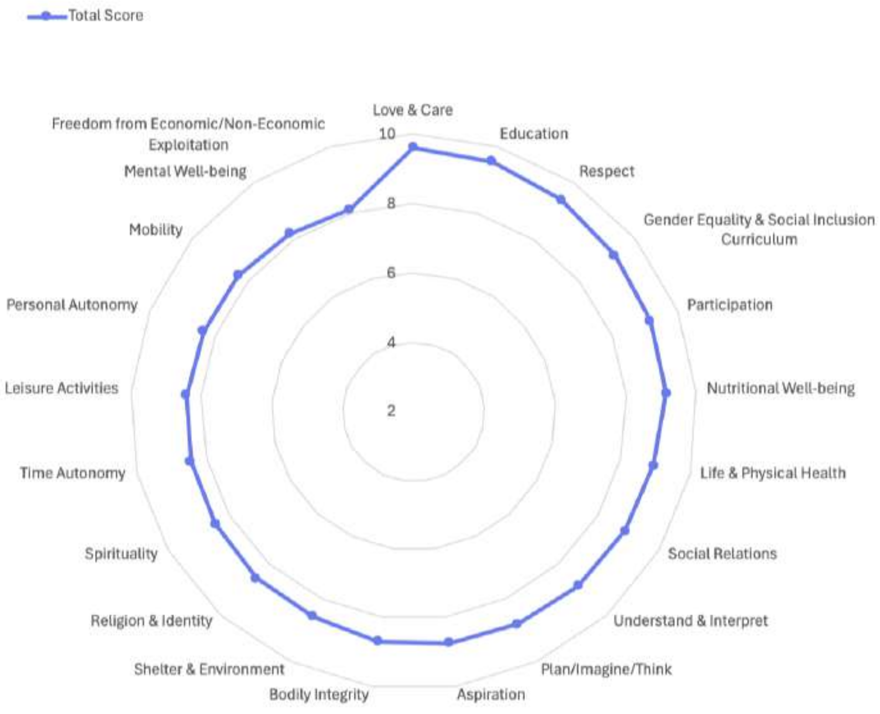
The mid-range areas of the chart, such as "Life and Physical Health", "Social Relations", "Understand and Interpret", and "Plan/Imagine/Think, represent dimensions that are important but somewhat less accentuated. They capture children's appreciation of vitality, friendship, curiosity, and creative expression. Field observations supported these findings:

children frequently collaborated, shared food, and helped one another during activities, reflecting the lived expression of Nussbaum's "capability for affiliation."

The slight inward points, such as "Aspiration" and "Bodily Integrity," indicate that while children do think about their future and safety, these are not as visibly prioritized as social or educational values. This may relate to cultural norms or age-related factors, where ideas of autonomy and bodily safety are less openly articulated. The inner zones of the radar chart, "Shelter and Environment", "Religion and Identity", "Spirituality", and "Time Autonomy" suggest that stability, moral grounding, and personal time are valued but secondary. Similarly, "Leisure Activities", "Personal Autonomy", and "Mobility" occupy smaller arcs, implying limited space for independence or recreation, particularly within structured school and family environments. The innermost domains, "Mental Well-being" and "Freedom from Economic and Non-Economic Exploitation," indicate areas that children may not yet perceive as central to their own well-being, even though these are significant from policy and rights perspectives.

Overall, the radar chart reveals that children in rural Bhojpur prioritize well-being as fundamentally relational and participatory, centered on being loved, respected, educated, and included. Capabilities associated with care, fairness, and connection extend farthest on the chart, whereas those tied to autonomy, material independence, and structural security remain closer to the center. This visualization underscores that children's notion of a good life is deeply embedded in relationships, learning, and mutual respect, a view consistent with the relational and justice-oriented vision of the Capability Approach (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2011; Walker, 2015). play, supporting Sen's (1992) argument that bodily health underpins all other functionings.

Figure 4.1 Children's Overall Prioritization of Well-Being Domains



Source, Field 2025

Children's Prioritization of Well-being Domains by Gender

The radar chart below illustrates how boys and girls collectively prioritize the twenty-one capability domains, offering a visual comparison of shared values and gendered differences in their prioritization of well-being. The overall symmetry of the chart shows broad agreement across most domains, suggesting that both groups hold a similar, inclusive understanding of what constitutes a good life. However, slight deviations between the blue and pink lines reveal meaningful differences in emphasis, reflecting how gendered experiences and social norms influence children's perceptions.

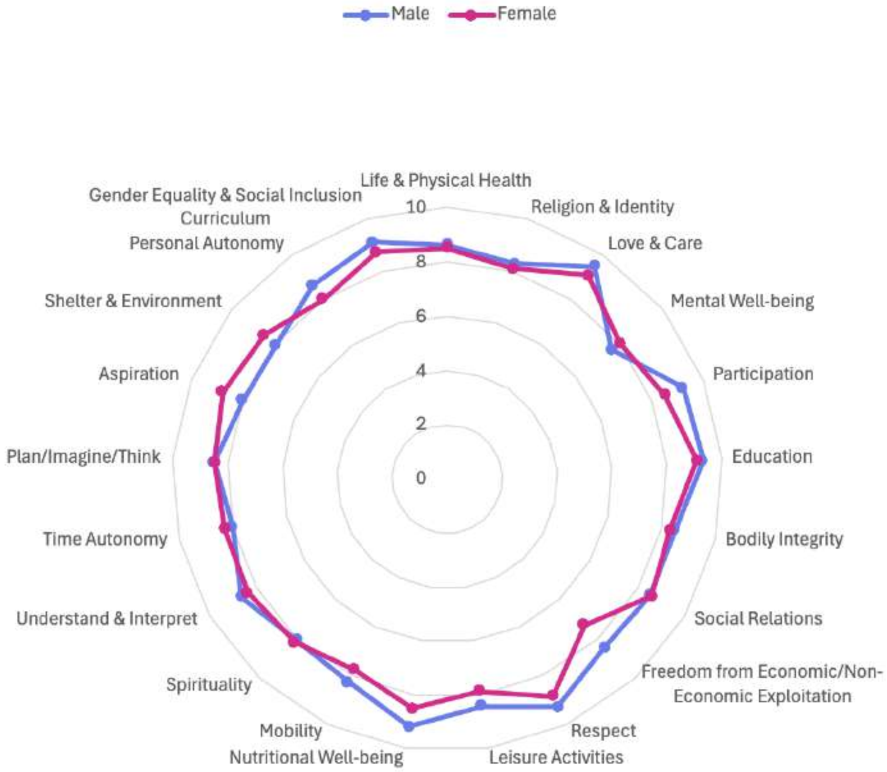
In both groups, the most outward peaks cluster around "Love and Care" and "Education", confirming that these are central to all children's well-being. Both boys and girls associate being cared for and receiving education with security, growth, and happiness. The proximity of their lines in these domains indicates that relational affection and learning are near-universal priorities. Yet, the slightly broader span of the male line in "Education", "Participation", and "Respect" suggests that boys place somewhat greater emphasis on recognition, voice, and active engagement, dimensions often encouraged through greater social visibility and autonomy. In comparison, the female line extends slightly further in "Aspiration", "Time Autonomy", and "Shelter and Environment". This visual distinction reflects how girls attach importance to future goals, safety, and control over personal time, domains often constrained by social expectations and limited mobility. Their emphasis on these areas may represent aspirational expressions of independence and self-determination within socially restricted contexts.

Both genders prioritize "Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Curriculum", reinforcing a shared awareness of fairness, inclusion, and justice in school life. This alignment indicates an emerging moral consciousness among children, where equality is seen not only as a right but as a valued part of community well-being. Differences also appear in the inner zones of the chart: boys' lines extend slightly more in "Freedom from Economic and Non-Economic Exploitation" and "Participation", reflecting their greater public exposure and participation in household or community work. Girls, meanwhile, show subtle prominence in "Mental Well-being" and "Spirituality", pointing to a greater inward orientation and reflective sense of emotional resilience, possibly shaped by their socialization in empathetic and nurturing roles.

The inner sections of the radar, where both lines converge, reveal that domains such as "Mobility", "Personal Autonomy", and "Leisure Activities" are valued but constrained. These are areas where social and cultural expectations narrow children's opportunities, particularly for girls, whose mobility and leisure are often monitored or limited. The shared low prominence of these domains highlights structural barriers affecting both genders, though in distinct ways.

Overall, the radar chart reveals that boys' and girls' prioritization of well-being is both relational and community-oriented, but they diverge in how agency is expressed. Boys' priorities align with participation, recognition, and fairness within visible social spaces, while girls' emphasis on aspiration, security, and emotional well-being reflects agency negotiated through reflection, hope, and care. These patterns illustrate how conversion factors, such as social expectations, freedom of movement, and decision-making exposure, shape what each gender values most. Despite their differences, both perspectives converge around the importance of being loved, respected, educated, and included, reaffirming that children's well-being in rural Nepali contexts is experienced and imagined through collective, relational, and interdependent dimensions rather than individual autonomy.

Figure 4.2 Children's Prioritization of Well-being Domains by Gender



Source, Field 2025

Children's Prioritization of Well-being Domains by Grade Level

The radar chart below compares how students in Grades 6, 7, and 8 prioritize the 21 capability domains, revealing both shared understandings and subtle shifts that correspond with age and developmental stage. The overall shape of the chart is broadly consistent across all three grades, indicating that children regard most capabilities as important. However, small variations in the outer edges of the lines show how priorities evolve as students move through middle school, reflecting differences in social experience, cognitive maturity, and exposure to responsibility.

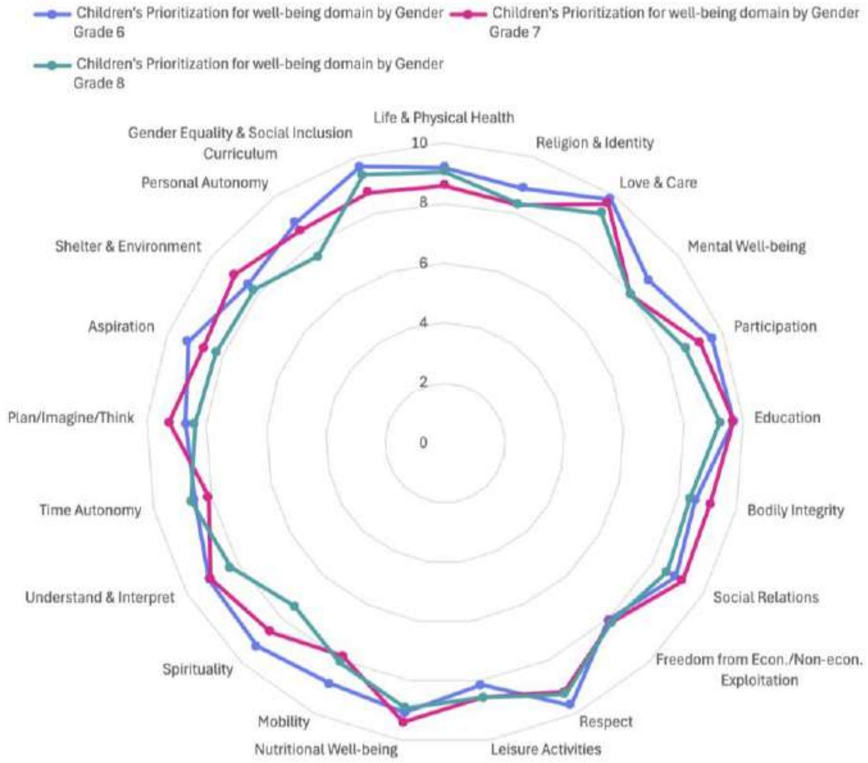
The chart shows that Grade 6 students assign the highest importance across nearly all capabilities, especially "Love and Care", "Education", "Respect", and "Participation". This pattern highlights that younger students anchor their sense of well-being in emotional security, learning, and relational trust. Their emphasis on care and guidance reflects their close attachment to teachers, family members, and peers, suggesting that well-being is understood as being cared for, included, and supported. Field observations reinforce this interpretation: Grade 6 students often collaborated closely during the exercise, sought reassurance from teachers, and valued collective belonging. Their prioritization aligns with Biggeri et al. (2006) and Camfield (2010), who emphasize that younger adolescents' well-being is deeply relational and grounded in protection and trust.

Grade 7 students display a more balanced pattern, maintaining peaks in "Education", "Love and Care", and "Nutritional Well-being" while expanding visibly in "Bodily Integrity", "Social Relations", and "Plan/Imagine/Think". This suggests a developmental stage characterized by growing awareness of personal safety, peer connection, and self-expression. Compared to Grade 6, their priorities reflect an emerging sense of independence and curiosity about fairness, gender equality, and future possibilities.

In contrast, Grade 8 students show slightly contracted scores across several domains, showing a more contained shape on the radar chart. Nonetheless, “Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Curriculum”, “Respect”, and “Education” remain prominent. The reduced extension in “Love and Care” and “Spirituality” suggests that older students begin to frame well-being less around emotional dependence and more around principles of fairness, achievement, and autonomy. This shift is characteristic of mid-adolescence, when students gradually redefine well-being in terms of recognition, competence, and identity (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Lerner, 2005). The moderate rise in Time Autonomy at this stage indicates increasing self-regulation and awareness of managing study time and responsibilities.

Overall, the radar chart illustrates a developmental progression from relational dependency to self-regulated reflection. Grade 6 students prioritize care, belonging, and guidance; Grade 7 students balance relational and cognitive domains with growing confidence; and Grade 8 students emphasize equality, respect, and structured autonomy. Despite these differences, the chart also shows a consistent outer contour around “Education” and “Respect”, demonstrating that social connection, learning, and fairness remain central to children’s sense of well-being throughout middle school. This pattern underscores that, even as independence grows, the foundation of well-being continues to be relational and community-based, reflecting the interdependent nature of development in the Nepali school context.

Figure 4.3 Children’s Prioritization of Well-being Domains by Grade Level



Source, Field 2025

Children's Prioritization of Well-being Domains by Age Groups

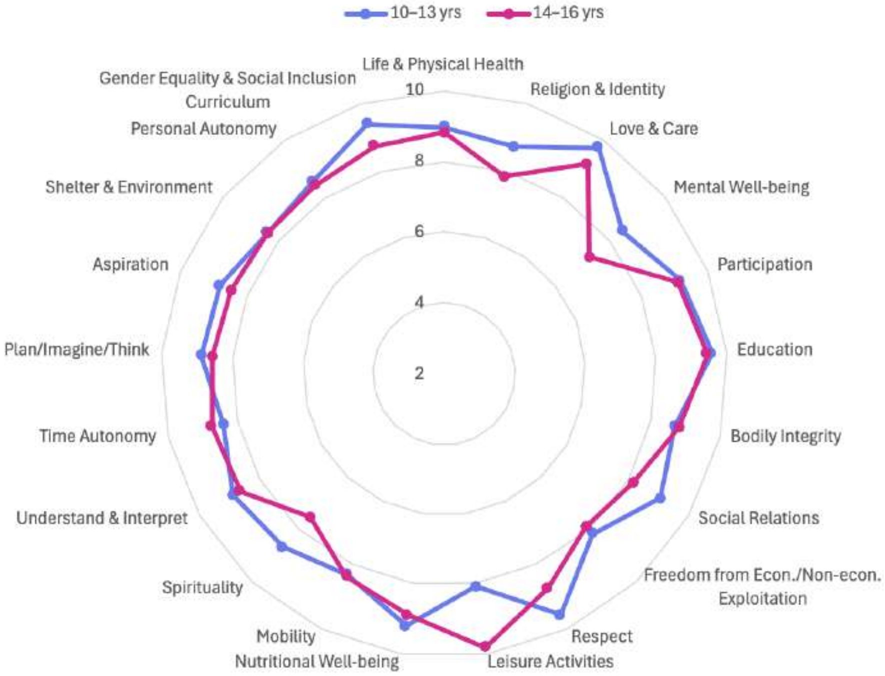
The radar chart compares children's prioritization of 21 well-being domains across two age groups (10–13 years and 14–16 years), to capture how prioritization of well-being evolves with maturity and lived experience. The overall circular symmetry of the chart indicates broad consensus on what constitutes well-being, as both younger and older children value most capabilities highly. However, slight variations in the extent of the two lines highlight age-related shifts in focus: while younger children emphasize relational and emotional aspects of well-being, older adolescents lean more toward reflective, cognitive, and structured dimensions.

For younger children (10–13 years), the chart extends further across almost all domains, especially "Love and Care", "Education", "Respect", and "Nutritional Well-being". These outward peaks suggest that their understanding of well-being is grounded in affection, learning, and guidance. Younger participants express greater attachment to social relationships and emotional security, seeing care, support, and fairness as defining elements of a good life. In contrast, older children (14–16 years) show a slightly more contained but differentiated pattern. Their line narrows around relational domains such as "Love and Care" and "Religion and Identity", but extends relatively more in "Aspiration", "Shelter and Environment", "Mobility", and "Time Autonomy". This shift reflects a developmental transition toward self-awareness, responsibility, and planning for the future. Older adolescents appear to reframe well-being less around being cared for and more around having the capacity to act, choose, and manage time effectively. The relative prominence of "Plan/Imagine/Think" and "Aspiration "suggests an emerging concern with goal setting, agency, and future orientation, key features of mid-adolescent reasoning and self-definition.

The convergence between the two lines in domains such as "Education", "Respect", and "Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Curriculum" indicates that learning, fairness, and inclusion remain central values regardless of age. Both groups consistently identify education as a core capability, linking it to knowledge, confidence, and social recognition. Likewise, Respect and Equality appear as moral constants across development, reaffirming that children view well-being through a relational and justice-oriented lens rather than a purely material or individualistic one. The areas closer to the center of the chart, including "Freedom from Economic/Non-Economic Exploitation" and 'Mental Well-being", show moderate emphasis across both age groups.

In summary, age-related discrepancies reflect a developmental transition from an emphasis on relational and moral dimensions of well-being in early adolescence to a focus on participatory and achievement-oriented aspects in later adolescence. Various conversion factors, such as academic demands, peer influences, and familial expectations, play a differential role in shaping these priorities across different ages. For younger children, well-being is co-constructed through care and affirmation; for middle adolescents, it broadens through experiences of participation and fairness; and for older adolescents, it is navigated through autonomy, recreation, and self-regulation. These insights affirm that children's well-being is a dynamic construct, evolving with age and social experiences, and highlight the necessity for the Capability Approach to encompass these temporal dimensions of capability development (Walker, 2019; Nussbaum, 2011).

Figure 4.4 Children's Prioritization of Well-being Domains by Age Groups



Source, Field 2025

Children's Understanding of Well-Being Domains

This section explores how children understand twenty-one well-being domains presented in the booklet. Drawing from their written examples and focus group discussions, the analysis uncovers the qualitative dimensions of children's well-being, what these capabilities mean in their lives, and how they are expressed through relationships, emotions, and actions.

Children's Overall Understanding of Well-being

The table below summarizes children's understanding of well-being across capability domains, presenting the core functionings (what children say they do or value) and their understanding (what children mean), along with selected illustrative examples. Children articulate well-being primarily as actionable practices; they describe what they do (functionings) more than what they are free to do (capabilities). Their phrasing centers verbs: "should", "do"; yoga, keep clean, eat nutritious food, participate, ask, respect, plan, imagine. In Sen's terms, these accounts foreground well-being achievement (realized beings and doings) and provide indirect clues about well-being freedom through mentions of enablers and constraints (time, transport, permission, school rules), i.e., conversion factors that condition capability sets.

The two cross-cutting patterns stand out. First, the education–health–participation triad: children repeatedly link health to study and play, and participation to confidence and recognition, indicating a tightly coupled functioning profile around school life. Second, a normative core shared by most children: education is compulsory; respect is reciprocal; equality (including GESI) is right, suggesting broad endorsement of equity values even where means and opportunities differ. Taken together, the data show children's holistic understanding of well-being as everyday doings embedded in relationships, institutions, and environments. Their statements map a strong set of functionings; references to rules, resources, and roles reveal the capability constraints and enablers that shape those functionings.

The wording of children's statements predominantly reflects well-being achievement, that is, functionings expressed through action verbs ("do yoga," "keep clean," "participate," "study"). However, across several domains (notably Bodily Integrity, Freedom from Exploitation, Mobility, Personal Autonomy, and GESI), children also articulate capabilities/freedoms, using rights and opportunity language ("equal rights," "without restriction," "right to study," "be able to make decisions"). In addition, children often voice normative expectations ("we should respect everyone," "education is compulsory"), definitions ("religion is our identity"), and states/feelings (e.g., "feeling safe," "having a calm mind"). Thus, while action-oriented functionings dominate, the data also contain clear expressions of freedoms, values, and meanings.

Table 4.1 Children's Understanding of Well-Being Domains

Well-being Domain	Core Functionings (Children's Words)	Understanding
Life & Physical Health	• Doing yoga, exercise, and sports to stay energetic and avoid sickness. • Maintaining cleanliness: washing hands, bathing, wearing warm clothes, and avoiding junk food. • Eating nutritious meals and drinking clean water. • Seeking treatment when sick and following health lessons learned in school. • Linking health to study and play: "If we eat well, we can study and play."	Children understand life and physical health as staying active, clean, and energetic. They associate good health with doing yoga, exercising, eating nutritious food, and maintaining cleanliness. Health is seen as essential for study, play, and happiness. "If we eat well, we can study and play." For them, being healthy means freedom from sickness and the ability to perform daily activities productively.
Religion & Identity	• Following one's faith and respecting all religions. • Celebrating festivals and protecting cultural traditions. • Speaking politely about religion and avoiding discrimination. • Understanding religion as part of identity and belonging.	Religion and identity are viewed as sources of belonging, recognition, and moral guidance. Children link identity to the religion they follow and to cultural practices such as celebrating festivals and showing respect for all faiths. They see religion as something that gives meaning and community: "People know us by our religion."
Love & Care	• Receiving love and care from parents, teachers, siblings, and friends. • Giving care to younger peers and helping friends who feel upset. • Treating love as a reciprocal practice learned from family. • Linking care to safety and guidance.	Love and care mean receiving affection, protection, and guidance from parents, teachers, siblings, and friends, and giving care in return. Children describe love as mutual support and emotional security within families and schools: "Parents love us, and we love them." It represents warmth, attention, and a sense of safety.
Mental Well-being	• Practicing yoga, meditation, and positive thinking to reduce stress. • Talking with parents, friends, or teachers when worried, and playing to feel better. • Striving for a calm, happy mind and focus during class. • Recognizing mental health as part of overall well-being.	Children define mental well-being as having a peaceful, happy, and focused mind. They connect it to positive thinking, yoga, meditation, and play, as well as sharing worries with trusted adults. Mental health is understood as both emotional balance and academic concentration; keeping the mind calm helps them learn better.

Well-being Domain	Core Functionings (Children's Words)	Understanding
Participation	• Joining school programs, clubs, assemblies, sports, and competitions. • Using participation to show talent and gain confidence. • Managing time for study and play to participate effectively. • Advocating for everyone's right to participate equally.	Participation means being involved, included, and recognized in school life. Children see it as joining sports, assemblies, and competitions to show talent and gain confidence. Being able to take part signifies equality and belonging. Some also view participation as a path to success and confidence.
Education	• Attending school, studying, reading, and writing. • Completing homework on time and asking questions. • Seeing education as a path to a bright future and good character. • Linking learning to future careers and service.	Education is described as the path to a bright and successful life. Studying, reading, and writing are core to becoming good individuals and achieving goals such as becoming teachers, doctors, or police officers. Education is seen as a right, a responsibility, and a source of pride.
Bodily Integrity	• Protecting one's body and saying no to harm. • Maintaining hygiene, such as clean clothes and trimmed nails. • Ensuring girls' dignity and safety during adolescence. • Learning to act responsibly regarding personal boundaries.	Bodily integrity is understood as keeping one's body safe, clean, and respected. Children talk about protecting themselves from harm, maintaining hygiene, and ensuring girls' dignity during adolescence. They see body care as self-responsibility and moral discipline.
Social Relations	• Living with harmony, cooperation, and friendship. • Walking together to school and helping each other. • Avoiding fighting or discrimination. • Solving problems together and speaking kindly.	Social relations mean living together peacefully and helping each other. Children value harmony, cooperation, and friendship in their homes, schools, and communities. They emphasize kindness, problem-solving, and non-discrimination. Good relationships are part of a good life.
Freedom from Exploitation	• Avoiding child labor and harmful work. • Rejecting all forms of abuse and discrimination. • Promoting fairness, dignity, and safety. • Expecting protection from families and schools.	Children interpret freedom from exploitation as being protected from child labor, abuse, or unfair treatment. They believe every child should have the right to study, play, and rest without overwork or violence. This freedom is tied to dignity, equality, and safety.
Respect	• Respecting elders and younger peers. • Treating everyone equally regardless of caste, gender, or background. • Greeting politely and behaving kindly. • Understanding respect as mutual.	Respect means treating everyone kindly and fairly regardless of age, gender, caste, or status. Children see respect as both a right and a responsibility linked to trust, success, and good relationships in school and community.
Leisure Activities	• Playing sports, drawing, dancing, singing, and creating stories. • Balancing leisure with study and chores. • Joining sports clubs and creative activities. • Using leisure to relax and express oneself.	Leisure is understood as time to play, relax, and express creativity. Children describe drawing, dancing, and playing football or volleyball as ways to refresh and build confidence. Leisure supports happiness and learning.
Nutritional Well-being	• Eating balanced meals with vegetables, fruits, dairy, eggs, meat, or fish. • Avoiding junk food and preferring home-cooked meals. • Linking nutrition to strength and recovery. • Understanding how food affects energy.	Children define nutrition as eating food that makes the body strong and energetic. Nutritious eating is tied to health, learning, and happiness. They warn against junk food and value home-cooked meals.

Well-being Domain	Core Functionings (Children's Words)	Understanding
Mobility	• Moving safely between home, school, and market. • Walking or cycling with friends. • Using public transport safely. • Being punctual when traveling.	Mobility means being able to move safely and freely between everyday places. It symbolizes independence, access to opportunities, and punctuality.
Spirituality	• Practicing prayer or meditation. • Expressing gratitude and kindness. • Seeking inner peace and moral goodness. • Respecting others' spiritual beliefs.	Spirituality is perceived as prayer, meditation, and inner calm. It provides emotional balance, focus, and moral grounding.
Understand & Interpret	• Understanding lessons clearly and asking questions. • Explaining ideas to friends and using local examples. • Listening and thinking actively. • Valuing shared understanding.	Understanding and interpretation reflect comprehension, curiosity, and peer learning. Being able to explain lessons to others is seen as a sign of being a good and capable student.
Time Autonomy	• Reaching school on time and following schedules. • Balancing study, chores, play, and prayer. • Viewing punctuality as discipline. • Managing daily routines independently.	Time autonomy means valuing time and using it responsibly. Children see punctuality and routine as discipline and opportunity.
Planning, Imagination & Thinking	• Planning ahead for study and club activities. • Imagining future careers. • Using drawing and writing to express goals. • Turning imagination into effort.	Planning and imagination are seen as ways of shaping the future. Children link creativity with self-improvement and purposeful action.
Aspiration	• Dreaming of future roles and careers. • Working hard toward goals. • Connecting aspirations to family pride and service. • Keeping multiple paths open.	Aspiration means dreaming of what one wants to become and working to achieve it. Dreams are tied to self-discipline, family hopes, and future contribution.
Shelter & Environment	• Keeping home and school clean. • Managing waste and planting trees. • Valuing peaceful surroundings. • Recognizing the environment as shared.	Children define shelter and environment as having clean, safe, and peaceful surroundings. They link environmental care to well-being and responsibility.
Personal Autonomy	• Making personal decisions. • Doing personal chores independently. • Expressing feelings respectfully. • Linking autonomy to trust.	Personal autonomy is understood as being able to make choices and manage responsibilities. Children link autonomy with maturity and adult trust.
Gender Equality & Social Inclusion	• Believing boys and girls are equal. • Ensuring equal opportunities for all. • Rejecting discrimination based on caste, class, or ethnicity. • Sharing tasks and leadership roles fairly.	Children interpret gender equality and inclusion as fairness and equal rights for everyone. Equality is seen as both a moral value and a daily practice.

Source, Field 2025

Integrating Quantitative and Qualitative Insights

If we build upon the preceding analysis of the importance rankings to deepen our understanding of how children define and experience well-being, clear interconnections emerge between what they value most and how they describe it. In the ranking exercise, Love & Care, Education, and Respect appeared as the three most highly valued capabilities, followed closely by Gender Equality and Social Inclusion, Participation, and Nutritional Well-being. In contrast, domains such as Mobility, Leisure Activities, Personal Autonomy, Mental Well-being, and Freedom from Exploitation received comparatively lower mean scores. The subsequent meaning-making discussions add depth to these patterns, showing that the highly ranked capabilities correspond to those most vividly described through emotional, moral, and relational examples. For instance, children's detailed understanding of Love & Care, as affection, safety, and reciprocity, mirrors its top ranking and underscores its perceived centrality to well-being. Similarly, Education is understood not only as academic success but also as moral growth, social respect, and future opportunity. In contrast, domains with lower numerical scores, such as Mobility and Freedom from Exploitation, were often framed in more limited or safety-based terms, reflecting contextual factors such as rural geography, gender norms, and adult supervision. Although Leisure Activities were described with enthusiasm, playing, dancing, and drawing, they may have been perceived as ordinary, unrestricted aspects of life, which could explain their moderate ranking. Likewise, aspects related to Personal and Time Autonomy appear to be less understood or experienced; many children have limited opportunities to exercise independent decision-making in their daily lives. Particularly, the lower ranking and limited understanding of Mental Well-being and Freedom from Economic or Non-Economic Exploitation suggest that these dimensions are less visible or discussed within children's social environments. While children value happiness, calmness, and fairness, they often lack the vocabulary or lived experience to articulate psychological or structural aspects of well-being.

Overall, these qualitative insights complement the earlier quantitative findings, revealing that children's prioritizations are not abstract preferences but are grounded in their lived realities, shaped by family relationships, school culture, and community expectations. The comparatively lower emphasis on autonomy, spirituality, and mental health highlights areas where social exposure and dialogue remain limited, indicating potential gaps between children's lived experiences and broader conceptual frameworks of well-being.

Children's Understanding of Well-being Domains by Gender

The table below summarizes the gendered understanding, illustrating similarities and differences in meaning-making across all capability domains. Children's interpretations of well-being reveal both shared and gendered meanings across the twenty-one capability domains. While both boys and girls emphasize health, education, love, respect, and participation as central to a good life, the ways they understand and relate to these capabilities vary. Boys' responses are generally action-oriented and outward-facing, connecting well-being with activity, strength, and success. Girls' interpretations are more reflective and relational, grounded in care, safety, and moral responsibility. These differences reflect the influence of gendered conversion factors: the social, cultural, and institutional norms that shape how boys and girls experience

Table 4.2 Children's Understanding of Well-being Domains by Gender

Well-being Domain	Boys' Understanding	Girls' Understanding	Key Gendered Contrasts
Life & Physical Health	Health means being strong, energetic, and active. Doing yoga, playing sports, and exercising are ways to stay fit and perform well. "Physical health should be good for us; it makes us energetic."	Health means staying clean, eating nutritious food, and doing yoga to prevent illness. "If we eat well, we can study and play."	Boys emphasize activity, strength, and performance; girls highlight self-care, hygiene, and disciplined routines.

Well-being Domain	Boys' Understanding	Girls' Understanding	Key Gendered Contrasts
Religion & Identity	Religion provides social belonging and recognition, temples, festivals, and cultural pride. "People know us by our religion."	Religion represents morality and respect. They stress non-discrimination and faith as identity. "We shouldn't discriminate between religions."	Boys associate religion with community and recognition, girls with inclusion and moral respect.
Love & Care	Love is received from parents, teachers, and elders; it provides safety and comfort. "Parents love us."	Love is both given and received, care for friends, juniors, and family alike. "We should give love and care to everyone."	Boys focus on receiving protection, girls emphasize reciprocal care and emotional responsibility.
Mental Well-being	Mental health means calmness and courage, meditation and yoga help control fear. "We should do meditation."	A peaceful, happy mind comes from yoga, positive thinking, and talking to parents or friends. "Yoga helps us with positive thinking."	Boys stress mental control and fearlessness, girls stress emotional balance and positivity.
Participation	Participation is about joining activities, sports, and programs to show talent and gain success. "We should participate in every program."	Participation means inclusion and equal opportunity; every child should get to join. "We should participate in all activities."	Boys associate participation with performance and recognition, and girls associate it with inclusion and equality.
Education	Education is a duty and discipline that ensures a good future. "We should study hard and be good person."	Education is a right and a means of empowerment and progress. "Education is very important; life will be dark without it."	Boys view education as a moral duty and success, girls as a right and empowerment.
Bodily Integrity	Protecting one's body from harm, dirt, and strangers. "We should protect our own body."	Safety, hygiene, and dignity, especially for girls during adolescence. "We should not be harmed physically or mentally."	Boys emphasize self-control and protection; girls emphasize safety, dignity, and rights.
Social Relations	Harmony and cooperation within the family and the neighborhood. "We should live together in harmony."	Equal and respectful relationships, helping others, and avoiding discrimination. "Maintaining good relationships without discrimination."	Boys highlight togetherness and unity, girls highlight equality and care.
Freedom from Exploitation	Being free from violence or child labor. "No one should be abused, no beating."	Having the right to study, play, and live safely. "Freedom from economic and non-economic exploitation is important."	Boys frame it as safety and fairness, girls as rights and protection.
Respect	Respecting elders and loving juniors, tied to manners and hierarchy. "We should respect elders and juniors too."	Everyone deserves respect regardless of gender or caste. "We should get respect, and it is our right."	Boys view respect as social order and hierarchy, girls as equality and moral entitlement.
Leisure Activities	Leisure means playing, sports, and physical fun. "Playing football, volleyball."	Leisure means creative rest, drawing, reading, singing, and writing. "Playing and drawing make us happy."	Boys connect leisure to energy and play, girls to creativity and relaxation.
Nutritional Well-being	Nutritious food provides strength. "We should eat nutritious food."	Balanced meals, healthy eating, and avoiding junk food. "We should eat green vegetables, fruits, and eggs."	Boys emphasize energy and vitality, girls emphasize dietary discipline and health knowledge.

Well-being Domain	Boys' Understanding	Girls' Understanding	Key Gendered Contrasts
Mobility	Freedom to move around, walking, cycling, visiting friends, or the market. "We go strolling around Bhojpur sometimes."	Safe and permissible movement, going to school or the market without restriction. "Mobility means going to school and other places safely."	Boys emphasize freedom and exploration, girls emphasize safety and permission.
Spirituality	Practicing religion through temples, prayer, and community rituals. "Temple, Church, Gumba."	Inner peace through meditation and gratitude. "Doing yoga and meditation for calmness."	Boys focus on external religious practice, girls on inner peace and reflection.
Understand & Interpret	Understanding teachers and elders, following instructions. "We can understand others and interpret."	Comprehension and peer learning, explaining to others. "I understand my teacher and interpret what they teach."	Boys stress obedience and comprehension, girls stress dialogue and shared learning.
Time Autonomy	Being punctual and completing tasks on time. "I study on time."	Using time wisely for study and chores. "We should utilize time properly."	Boys associate time with discipline and control, girls with planning and self-management.
Planning, Imagination & Thinking	Imagining the future, such as becoming an army, pilot, or doctor. "I imagine becoming an army person."	Planning life goals and steps to achieve them. "Planning life goals and thinking about how to achieve them."	Boys stress ambition and dream roles, girls stress structured planning and goal setting.
Aspiration	Dreaming of success and service, such as becoming an army, police officer, or engineer. "I want to be in the army."	Aspiring to respected and caring roles such as teacher, doctor, and footballer. "I will be a teacher."	Boys link aspiration to status and service, girls link it to care, pride, and achievement.
Shelter & Environment	Environment as home, nature, and surroundings, protecting forests and cleanliness. "Forests, plants, managing trash."	Clean home and school, personal responsibility for tidiness. "Cleaning house and surroundings."	Boys focus on environmental stewardship, girls on domestic cleanliness and order.
Personal Autonomy	Making one's own decisions and managing personal tasks. "I can make decisions in my own tasks."	Expressing opinions, taking responsibility, and doing chores independently. "Making our own decisions and expressing our feelings."	Boys highlight independence and choice, girls highlight voice and responsibility.
Gender Equality & Social Inclusion	Equality means fairness and harmony. "No discrimination."	Equal rights and opportunities for all genders and groups. "Boys and girls have equal rights."	Boys stress fairness and unity, girls stress rights and justice.

Source, Field 2025

Integrated Insights by Gender

A closer look at how boys and girls understand well-being across the 21 capability domains reveals meaningful connections between their importance rankings and lived interpretations. In both groups, the highest-ranked domains, "Love & Care", "Education", "Respect", and "Gender Equality & Social Inclusion", are those most vividly and emotionally articulated during discussions. At the same time, the less highly ranked domains, such as "Personal Autonomy", "Freedom from Exploitation", "Mobility", and "Mental Well-being", were also those conceptualized with limited vocabulary or more externally framed interpretations. For instance, many children spoke of autonomy as "doing work on my own" rather than as freedom of choice, and mental well-being as "being calm" rather than as psychological health. Similarly, mobility was discussed mainly in terms of safety, "walking with friends," "going to school", rather than independence or access. These narrow interpretations help explain their lower rankings, suggesting that unfamiliar or socially constrained experiences yield less perceived importance. In the ranking exercise, boys consistently assigned slightly higher scores to domains linked with activity, performance, and autonomy, such as "Life & Physical Health", "Participation", "Respect", and "Mobility", while girls scored higher in domains associated with care, emotional balance, and moral values, including "Mental Well-being", "Aspiration", "Shelter and Environment", and "Spirituality". These variations, while modest in scale, signal distinct emphases in how well-being is understood and enacted across gender. Thus, while numerical scores reflect surface preferences, the narratives uncover the moral, emotional, and social logic underlying them.

Overall, these integrated insights demonstrate that children's rankings are not abstract or mechanical choices; they are grounded in lived meanings shaped by family, school, and community contexts. The interplay between quantitative prioritization and qualitative interpretation shows that what children value most aligns closely with what they understand best, domains embedded in daily routines, relationships, and social recognition, whereas those they rank lower correspond to less tangible or less experienced dimensions of well-being.

Children's Understanding of Well-being Domains by Grades

The table below shows how children's understanding of well-being evolves across grades, reflecting developmental, cognitive, and social transitions during early adolescence. Across grades, children's understanding of well-being shows a clear developmental progression. In Grade 6, understanding is grounded in concrete daily routines centered on the home–school axis, punctuality, eating home-cooked meals, helping parents, participating in school activities with encouragement, respecting elders, and limited mobility; rights are recognized but understood more as good norms than enforceable entitlements. By Grade 7, understanding broadens into the school and community, with emphasis on cooperation, inclusion, non-discrimination, balanced use of time, diversified aspirations tied to being a "good person," and clearer awareness of exploitation and unfair treatment. In Grade 8, children link capabilities to self-management and rights-based reasoning: participation is pursued through personal interests and talents, time is strategically planned beyond school hours, education is seen as essential for future opportunities, bodily integrity includes gender dignity, respect and equality are framed as rights, social relations involve problem-solving, environmental care extends to community stewardship, and aspirations become self-authored and tied to the right to shape one's future. This progression suggests that as children advance through schooling and adolescence, their notion of well-being shifts from dependence and imitation toward autonomy and moral reasoning.

Table 4.3 Children's Understanding of Well-Being Domains by Grades

Well-being Domain	Grade 6 Students' Understanding	Grade 7 Students' Understanding	Grade 8 Students' Understanding
Life & Physical Health	Students say that staying healthy means doing yoga and exercise daily, eating	Students describe health as doing exercise and yoga, eating balanced food, and	Students explain physical health as self-care and responsibility: exercising,

Well-being Domain	Grade 6 Students' Understanding	Grade 7 Students' Understanding	Grade 8 Students' Understanding
	fruits and green vegetables, and keeping clean. They connect health to having energy to study and play, "If we do yoga, we become energetic."	avoiding junk food. They view good health as necessary for learning, happiness, and participation in school.	eating nutritious food, washing, and wearing clean clothes. They link health to preventing illness and maintaining energy for success.
Religion & Identity	Students say, "Our religion is our identity." They mention being Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, or Kirat and believe religion should be respected and preserved through festivals and polite behavior.	Students emphasize following one's own religion and respecting others. They reject discrimination based on faith and value all religions equally.	Students interpret religion as culture and moral learning. They associate it with language, festivals, and belonging, and insist that no one should be discriminated against by caste or religion.
Love & Care	Students associate love and care with parents, teachers, and siblings who protect, guide, and help them. Love means safety and affection.	Students describe love as something to both give and receive among family, teachers, friends, and juniors. Love builds peace and togetherness.	Students explain love and care as mutual responsibility. Caring for others, especially juniors, is seen as moral behavior and emotional support.
Mental Well-being	Students define mental well-being as having a calm and happy mind. Yoga, meditation, and fun activities help them feel peaceful.	Students stress positive thinking and controlling worry. They relate mental health to relaxation, sharing feelings, and focusing on study.	Students connect mental well-being with yoga, positive thinking, and open communication. Inner peace supports concentration and emotional balance.
Participation	Students understand participation as joining sports, assemblies, and school programs to feel included and appreciated.	Students describe participation as taking part in creative and cultural programs and cooperating with others to discover talents and happiness.	Students explain participation as expressing talent, achieving goals, and working with peers. It is linked to recognition, confidence, and success.
Education	Students say education means reading, writing, studying, and listening to teachers. It helps them become good people and make their families proud.	Students call education the key to knowledge and progress. They say everyone needs education and link it to discipline and good manners.	Students view education as the path to success in modern life. It brings knowledge of science and technology, opens opportunities, and ensures dignity.
Bodily Integrity	Students associate bodily integrity with protecting oneself from harm, staying clean, and maintaining dignity.	Students describe bodily integrity as personal safety and freedom from harm or exploitation. They emphasize self-protection.	Students link bodily integrity to cleanliness, self-care, and gender awareness. They emphasize protecting girls and refusing exploitation.
Social Relations	Students understand social relations as harmony and cooperation with friends, neighbors, and classmates. Helping one another and avoiding conflict are important.	Students describe social relations as friendship, coordination, and unity. Speaking kindly and living peacefully make a good community.	Students explain social relations as cooperation and equality in school and the community. Problem-solving together and avoiding discrimination are emphasized.
Freedom from Economic and Non-economic Exploitation	Students say no child should be abused, overworked, or beaten. Freedom means being able to study and play.	Students emphasize not being harmed physically or mentally and equal rights for all children. Exploitation is seen as unfair treatment.	Students extend this to freedom from child labor and discrimination. They stress equal rights to education, rest, and dignity for everyone.

Well-being Domain	Grade 6 Students' Understanding	Grade 7 Students' Understanding	Grade 8 Students' Understanding
Respect	Students define respect as greeting and listening to elders and being polite to juniors.	Students describe respect as valuing all people equally, regardless of caste, gender, or status.	Students explain respect as reciprocal: honoring elders, loving juniors, and treating everyone kindly.
Leisure Activities	Students understand leisure as time to play, draw, dance, sing, and enjoy. It makes them happy and energetic.	Students describe leisure as time for fun, creativity, sports, and sometimes helping family.	Students link leisure to relaxation, creativity, and learning new skills, such as writing or practicing sports.
Nutritional Well-being	Students say eating dal-bhat, vegetables, fruits, milk, and eggs gives energy for study and play, while junk food is unhealthy.	Students explain that fruits and green vegetables keep the body strong and support physical growth.	Students describe nutritious eating as balanced meals with home-cooked foods, saying junk food harms health and happiness.
Mobility	Students say mobility means going to school, the market, and friends' houses, often walking or cycling together. It feels like freedom.	Students describe mobility as safe movement without restriction and link it to independence and punctuality.	Students explain mobility as moving to places for study, work, and recreation. They mention safety and opportunity.
Spirituality	Students mention yoga, prayer, and respecting religion as spiritual practices.	Students describe meditation and yoga as ways to stay calm and think positively.	Students explain spirituality as faith, meditation, gratitude, and respecting all beliefs equally.
Understand and Interpret	Students define understanding as listening carefully, asking questions, and helping peers understand.	Students describe understanding as grasping lessons and explaining to classmates with examples.	Students say understanding means learning deeply and sharing knowledge, which builds academic confidence.
Time Autonomy	Students say time autonomy means being punctual and not wasting time.	Students explain time autonomy as managing time for study, chores, and play, and seeing time as valuable.	Students view time autonomy as living with routine, discipline, and responsibility.
Plan, Imagine, and Think	Students express planning and imagination through dreaming of future careers and thinking before doing.	Students describe planning schoolwork and imagining goals and steps to achieve them.	Students explain planning as visualizing the future and organizing tasks to achieve goals.
Aspiration	Students express aspiration through dreams of becoming teachers, doctors, police officers, soldiers, or footballers.	Students describe aspiration as a desire to become someone successful and disciplined.	Students explain aspiration as the determination to achieve goals through effort and learning.
Shelter and Environment	Students talk about cleaning the home and school, and planting trees as a shared responsibility.	Students emphasize clean surroundings and natural beauty as part of health.	Students describe the environment as connected to well-being, responsibility, and peaceful living.
Personal Autonomy	Students describe autonomy as doing personal tasks independently and making small decisions.	Students connect autonomy with expressing opinions and choosing actions responsibly.	Students explain autonomy as making decisions with responsibility and claiming rights respectfully.
Gender Equality and Social Inclusion	Students say boys and girls should be treated equally and everyone included.	Students link equality with equal rights to study and participate, regardless of caste or religion.	Students express equality by rejecting discrimination and ensuring equal opportunity in everyday life.

Source, Field 2025

Integrated Insights by Grade

The findings deepen earlier patterns by illustrating how children's meanings and priorities mature with grade level. The quantitative data show that students in Grade 6 generally assigned higher scores across most domains, particularly "Love & Care", "Education", "Respect", "Participation", and "Gender Equality & Social Inclusion", indicating a more affective and relational orientation toward well-being. Grade 6 students often emphasized emotional security, affection, and moral learning, suggesting that their understanding is rooted in care and belonging rather than autonomy or self-determination. Grade 7 students displayed a more balanced pattern, scoring highly on "Love & Care", "Education", "Participation", "Nutritional Well-being", and "Social Relations". Their qualitative accounts reflect growing responsibility, discipline, and engagement with school and peers, showing that social participation and cooperation become central markers of well-being at this stage. By contrast, Grade 8 students exhibited slightly lower mean scores overall, reflecting a more selective prioritization of domains such as "Love & Care", "Respect", "Education", "Life & Physical Health", "Gender Equality & Social Inclusion, and Bodily Integrity". Their qualitative descriptions reveal a more self-aware and critical stance, linking well-being to protection, equality, and personal growth. This shift indicates an emerging sense of identity and social consciousness as children approach adolescence.

In sum, the integration of ranking and meaning-making reveals a developmental trajectory in how children perceive and define well-being. Students emphasize care, belonging, and immediate happiness; middle graders balance duty, discipline, and participation; and older students focus more on selfhood, equality, and future aspirations. These patterns reflect not only cognitive and emotional maturation but also evolving conversion factors, including exposure to curriculum content, peer influence, and heightened social awareness, that shape how children in different grades interpret what it means to live well.

Children's Understanding of Well-being Domains by Age Groups

The table below illustrates how children's understanding of well-being evolves across two age groups (10-13 and 14–16 years), corresponding to the early and transitional phases of adolescence. Children's understanding of well-being progresses from concrete routines to reflective agency and advocacy. At ages 10–13, well-being is defined through visible actions such as punctuality, cleanliness, healthy eating, and respecting elders; doing things is seen as a rule to follow rather than

freedom to choose. By ages 14–16, well-being is articulated in terms of self-direction, decision-making, mental health, gender equality, and contribution to community; equality becomes a matter of awareness and advocacy. Overall, understanding moves from obedience and routine to responsibility and reflection, and finally to agency and collective care as children's social awareness and maturity expand.

Table 4.4 Children's Understanding of Well-being Domains by Age Group

Capability Domain	Ages 10–13	Ages 14–16
Life & Physical Health	Health means staying energetic, strong, and illness-free by eating balanced food and doing yoga, exercise, and sports. Good health supports attention, happiness, study, play, and achieving goals, and also helps avoid stress and overthinking.	Health is being energetic, tension-free, and able to do activities; older teens link it to avoiding depression/overthinking and sustaining life goals.

Capability Domain	Ages 10–13	Ages 14–16
Religion & Identity	Religion is identity (Hindu, Buddhist, Kirat, Muslim, Christian) and should be respected without discrimination; festivals and polite speech "save our religion."	Religion is to be respected and protected (celebrations, awareness), while all religions are equal; identity is acknowledged, but tolerance is emphasised.
Love & Care	Love and care come from parents, teachers, family, and friends, and should also be given to juniors. It means protection, emotional support, kindness, helping one another, and inclusion.	Love/care is family affection and support during illness or stress; it extends to peers and community, paired with mutual respect.
Mental Well-being	Mental well-being means reduced stress, positive thinking, staying happy, and doing meaningful activities. Children cope by talking with family, doing what they enjoy, practicing yoga/meditation, and staying calm to study and behave well.	It is concentration, calm, and self-regulation through yoga/exercise and talking with trusted people to manage pressure.
Participation	Participation is joining school activities, sports, and creative programs, which builds confidence, skills, talent, and recognition. Teachers' encouragement and support matter.	Participation showcases talent and interests, fulfills dreams, and contributes to solving social problems; clubs and competitions are valued.
Education	Education gives knowledge, discipline, skills, and future opportunities. It requires resources (books, pencils) and guidance from teachers and parents, and is essential for success regardless of age.	Education is the symbol of the future, enabling success, civility, and equal treatment; it also mentions the right to study.
Bodily Integrity	Bodily integrity means protecting oneself and others, keeping clean, wearing appropriate clothes, saying no to harm, and avoiding strangers or exploitation. They clearly oppose any form of abuse.	It is a duty to protect one's body, awareness during adolescence/periods, and nobody may violate us; safety practices (masks, hygiene) are noted.
Social Relations	Social relations are living together peacefully with family, friends, and neighbors, cooperation, coordination, emotional support, and helping during difficulties.	They emphasise cooperation to solve problems, peaceful talk, and travelling/doing things together; community bonds are instrumental.
Freedom from Economic & Non-economic Exploitation	Children emphasize freedom from child labor, abuse, and discrimination. They want the right to study, play, enjoy life, and be protected by adults and the community.	They extend it to rights awareness and voice against superstition and harmful norms; no overwork and equal chances are expected.
Respect	Respect is for everyone; elders, juniors, guests, regardless of caste or status. It is earned through good behavior, helping others, and success.	Respect is listening to elders, loving juniors, and equal treatment across religion/caste/gender; it is both a right and a duty.
Leisure Activities	Leisure includes play, sports, drawing, poems, reading, and helping parents. It is fun, supports learning, creativity, rest, and personal interests.	Leisure is drawing, sports, music, collecting experiences, and helping at home; it is also personal entertainment and growth.
Nutritional Well-being	Nutrition means eating balanced, home-cooked meals (dal bhat tarkari, greens, eggs, fruits, meat/fish), while limiting junk food. Healthy food keeps the body strong and energetic.	Nutrition gives energy, protection, and growth; it stresses clean, fresh food and links diet to mental freshness.
Mobility	Mobility is moving independently between home, school, market, and community spaces, often with family or friends. It supports learning, enjoyment, and exploration.	Mobility includes walking/transport (bus, cycle, scooter) and travelling with friends; they caution road safety (drive slowly).
Spirituality	Spirituality is religion as identity and morning yoga/meditation/prayer; it gives joy and guidance.	Spirituality is the celebration and protection of traditions (Dashain, Tihar,

Capability Domain	Ages 10–13	Ages 14–16
		Losar), awareness, and respect for all faiths.
Understand & Interpret	Understanding means listening, asking questions, being attentive, and helping others learn. It involves curiosity and explaining concepts to peers.	Understanding is comprehension plus reflection and sharing, concentrating in class, and teaching/learning reciprocity.
Time Autonomy	Time autonomy means being punctual, following routines for study/chores/play, completing tasks on time, and recognizing that time is valuable and cannot be bought.	Time autonomy is discipline, timetables, and valuing time to create opportunities and second chances.
Plan, Imagine & Think	Planning involves imagining future careers, setting study or life goals, and thinking through steps to achieve them. Imagination supports determination and action.	Planning is organising actions before doing, presenting thoughts to others, and thinking for the nation/community.
Aspiration	Children aspire to become teachers, doctors, police/army, engineers, pilots, singers, footballers, and to go abroad. Aspirations are linked to hard work, pride, and future success.	Aspirations mean becoming "a big person," serving the nation, helping the poor/helpless; strong will plus effort is emphasized.
Shelter & Environment	A healthy environment means clean homes, schools, forests, and surroundings. Cleanliness prevents sickness and maintains peace.	The environment is clean, safe, and peaceful spaces; they mention trash management, discipline, and environmental awareness.
Personal Autonomy	Autonomy means doing personal work independently, expressing feelings, making decisions, and pursuing interests. It is linked to rights and confidence.	Autonomy is freedom with responsibility, doing what one likes, making decisions, and personal cleaning/entertainment.
Gender Equality & Social Inclusion	GESI means no discrimination based on gender, caste, or religion. All children should have equal rights to study, participate, play, and be respected.	GESI is non-discriminatory by gender, caste, class, and ethnicity; they call for awareness in society and equal opportunities.

Source, Field 2025

Integrated Insights by Age

If we look at the interconnection between the qualitative & quantitative datasets, younger children (10–13 years) prioritize nearly all capability domains, particularly Love & Care, Education, Respect, and Spirituality, while domains such as Mobility and Freedom from Exploitation rank lower. This indicates a limited understanding of abstract or less immediate aspects of well-being,. Their explanations emphasize relational warmth, moral guidance, and structured learning, reflecting dependence on adults and rule-based conceptions of a good life. Their understanding aligns with this shift, balancing personal responsibility with social cooperation and suggesting a more relational yet self-aware understanding of well-being. Among older adolescents (14–16 years), priorities shift toward Leisure Activities, Education, Love & Care, and Participation, while their qualitative narratives reveal deeper reflexivity and complexity. Their explanations connect well-being with mental balance, self-regulation, autonomy, and social responsibility. They articulate dignity, aspiration, and self-awareness, portraying well-being as both personal fulfillment and social contribution.

Overall, the integration of quantitative and qualitative findings reveals a clear developmental trajectory: as children grow older, their understanding of well-being evolves from dependence and external guidance to autonomy, reflection, and moral responsibility. This progression highlights the role of key conversion factors, particularly maturity, exposure to civic ideas, and school socialization, in shaping what children value and how they define a "good life." The intersection thus underscores that the importance children assign to capabilities is deeply intertwined with how they interpret their agency

Chapter V
Conclusion

This study set out to understand how children understand well-being through the Capability Approach in community schools of Bhojpur District, Nepal. In doing so, it responded to a central gap in both research and policy: while national and international frameworks emphasize children's rights and development, the perspectives of children themselves often remain peripheral. This research repositions them as knowledgeable social actors capable of articulating what it means to live well and flourish by foregrounding children's own voices, meanings, and interpretations.

The findings show that children understand well-being as multidimensional, relational, and deeply embedded in everyday practices. Rather than viewing well-being solely as an outcome (such as academic success or health status), children describe it in terms of doing, feeling, and becoming, maintaining physical health through exercise and cleanliness, sustaining loving and supportive relationships, being treated with respect, and having opportunities to learn, participate, play, and dream about the future. These understandings align with the Capability Approach's insistence that well-being consists of functionings and the freedom to pursue valued ways of being and doing. Children clearly distinguish between having (resources, support) and being able to do (agency and opportunity), indicating an intuitive grasp of the capability of freedoms.

The ranking of capability domains further reflects children's priorities. Life and physical health, education, love and care, and nutritional well-being consistently emerged as foundational for living well. However, domains such as participation, autonomy, aspiration, and gender equality also held strong significance, suggesting that children do not view well-being as merely survival or compliance; they associate it with dignity, respect, and opportunities for growth. Conversely, some lower-ranked domains, such as mobility and spirituality, appeared less salient in the numerical rankings but gained contextual meaning during discussions. The limited and uneven understanding of these domains suggests that children's perceptions here are shaped by social constraints and gendered experiences.

Differences across age and grade reveal a developmental progression in reasoning and self-awareness. Younger children (10-13) express well-being through visible actions and moral conduct, whereas older students (ages 14–16) demonstrate reflective agency, articulating ideas of autonomy, mental health, and gender equality. These shifts exemplify the evolving nature of capabilities as cognitive and emotional maturity expands children's understanding of freedom, responsibility, and aspiration.

Gendered patterns were also evident. While both boys and girls value education, respect, and participation, boys tend to frame well-being in terms of physical activity, mobility, visibility, and achievement. Girls, in contrast, emphasize safety, emotional security, self-discipline, and relational harmony. These differences reflect gendered conversion factors embedded in everyday life, mobility restrictions, household roles, expectations of care, and differentiated exposure to public space. The findings show that gender shapes not only opportunities but also the imaginaries through which well-being is understood and pursued.

This study adds to work that calls for participatory and context-grounded approaches to child well-being. It demonstrates that children are capable evaluators of their own lives and that their perspectives are essential for designing meaningful educational, social, and developmental interventions. The prominence children give to domains such as love and care, aspiration, respect, and bodily integrity often overlooked, shows that well-being is not only about infrastructure or school enrollment, but about emotional security, dignity, supportive relationships, and opportunities to imagine and pursue valued futures. Their well-being is often rooted in simple, everyday experiences, such as sitting with friends or walking around the village together. Methodologically, the study reinforces the value of dialogic and child-friendly tools that allow children to express their reasoning, emotions, and aspirations in their own terms.

The findings carry clear implications for policy and practice. Schools must move beyond a narrow academic focus to cultivate environments that support emotional safety, respect, equal participation, and self-expression. Gendered norms restricting mobility, confidence, and leadership must be addressed through structured, school-wide strategies that normalize equality as everyday practice rather than as curriculum content alone. Additionally, mechanisms for sustained child participation in decision-making should be institutionalized, and children's voices must not be consultative extras but central drivers of school culture.

Ultimately, the study affirms that children know what it means to live well, and their meanings matter. If schools are to be places where children flourish, not merely enroll, pass, and graduate, then children's voices must become central to how we define, measure, and implement well-being. Listening to children is not a symbolic gesture of inclusion; it is an act of epistemic justice. Their words reveal that well-being is not simply the absence of harm or the presence of resources; it is the freedom to grow into oneself with dignity, love, possibility, and support. As Nepal continues to pursue commitments to equity and social inclusion, integrating children's understanding of well-being into policy, curriculum, and school governance is not only necessary, it is foundational to nurturing capable, confident, and flourishing young children.

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Annex

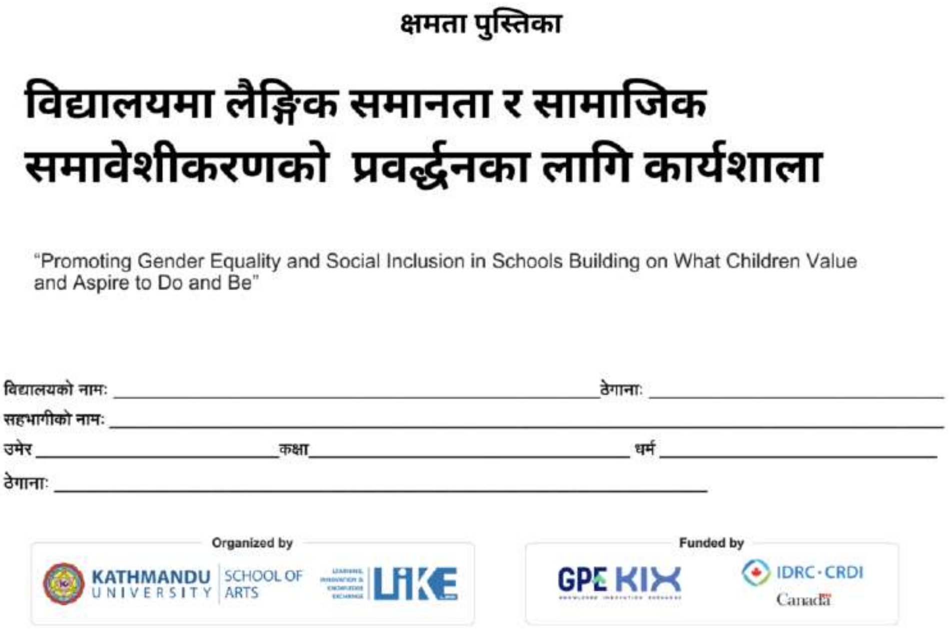
Annex A: School Information Profile

S.N	Schools Name	School Level	Toll and Ward No.
1	Jansewa Aa.Bi	Basic level	Bhojpur, 7
2	Sarswati Aa.Bi	Basic level	Pokhre, 8
3	Jankalyan Aa.Bi	Basic level	Kafle, 9
4	Yasodhara Ma.Bi	Secondary level	Taksar, 12
5	Biddodaya Ma. Bi	Secondary level	Bhojpur, 7

Annex B: Capability Booklet Used During Data Collection

The Children's Capability Booklet was developed to support participatory exploration of well-being from children's perspectives. It includes two structured sections: (i) prioritization of 21 valued capability domains through a 1–10 rating scale, and (ii) meaning-making examples wherein children describe or illustrate how each capability is experienced in their everyday lives.

Figure B.1 Cover page of the Children's Capability Booklet



क्षमता पुस्तिका

विद्यालयमा लैङ्गिक समानता र सामाजिक समावेशीकरणको प्रवर्द्धनका लागि कार्यशाला

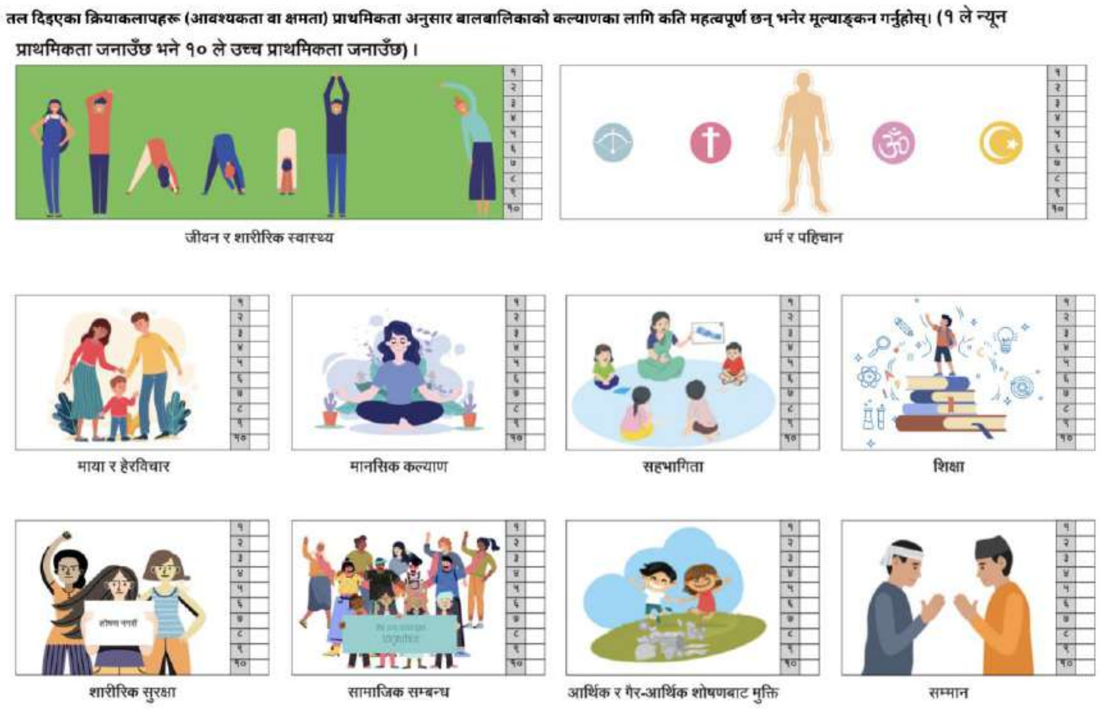
"Promoting Gender Equality and Social Inclusion in Schools Building on What Children Value and Aspire to Do and Be"

विद्यालयको नामः ______ ठेगानाः ______
सहभागीको नामः ______
उमेर ______ कक्षा ______ धर्म ______
ठेगानाः ______

Organized by

Funded by

Figure B.2 Capability prioritization rating section (Part 1)



तल दिइएका क्रियाकलापहरू (आवश्यकता वा क्षमता) प्राथमिकता अनुसार बालबालिकाको कल्याणका लागि कति महत्वपूर्ण छन् भनेर मूल्याङ्कन गर्नुहोस्। (१ ले न्यून प्राथमिकता जनाउँछ भने १० ले उच्च प्राथमिकता जनाउँछ)।

जीवन र शारीरिक स्वास्थ्य

धर्म र पहिचान

माया र हेरविचार

मानसिक कल्याण

सहभागिता

शिक्षा

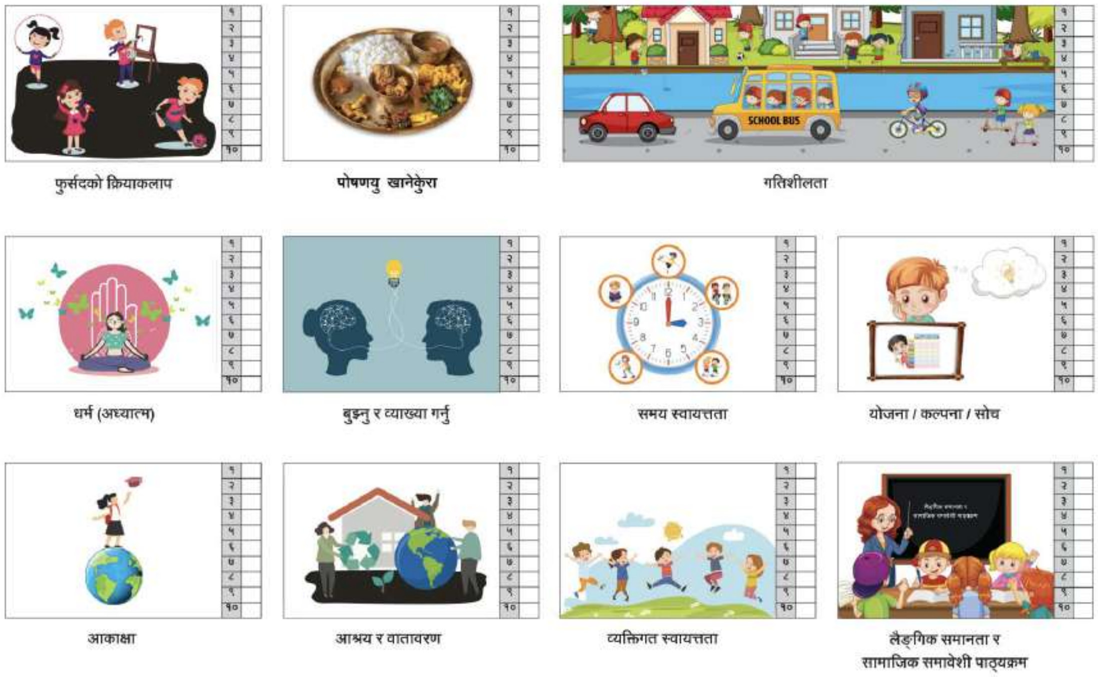
शारीरिक सुरक्षा

सामाजिक सम्बन्ध

आर्थिक र गैर-आर्थिक शोषणबाट मुक्ति

सम्मान

Figure B.3 Capability prioritization rating section (Part 2)



फुर्सदको क्रियाकलाप

पोषणयु खानेकुरा

गतिशीलता

धर्म (अध्यात्म)

बुझ्नु र व्याख्या गर्नु

समय स्वायत्तता

योजना / कल्पना / सोच

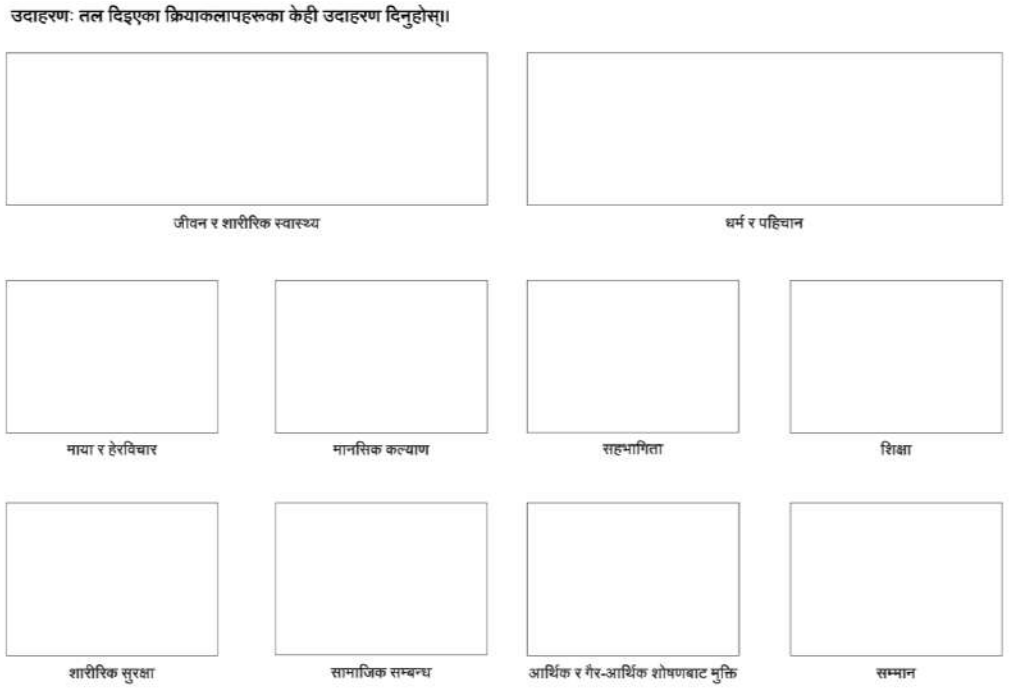
आकाक्षा

आश्रय र वातावरण

व्यक्तिगत स्वायत्तता

लैङ्गिक समानता र
सामाजिक समावेशी पाठ्यक्रम

Figure B.4 Meaning-making (Understanding) example section (Part 1)



उदाहरणः तल दिइएका क्रियाकलापहरूका केही उदाहरण दिनुहोस्।।

जीवन र शारीरिक स्वास्थ्य

धर्म र पहिचान

माया र हेरविचार

मानसिक कल्याण

सहभागिता

शिक्षा

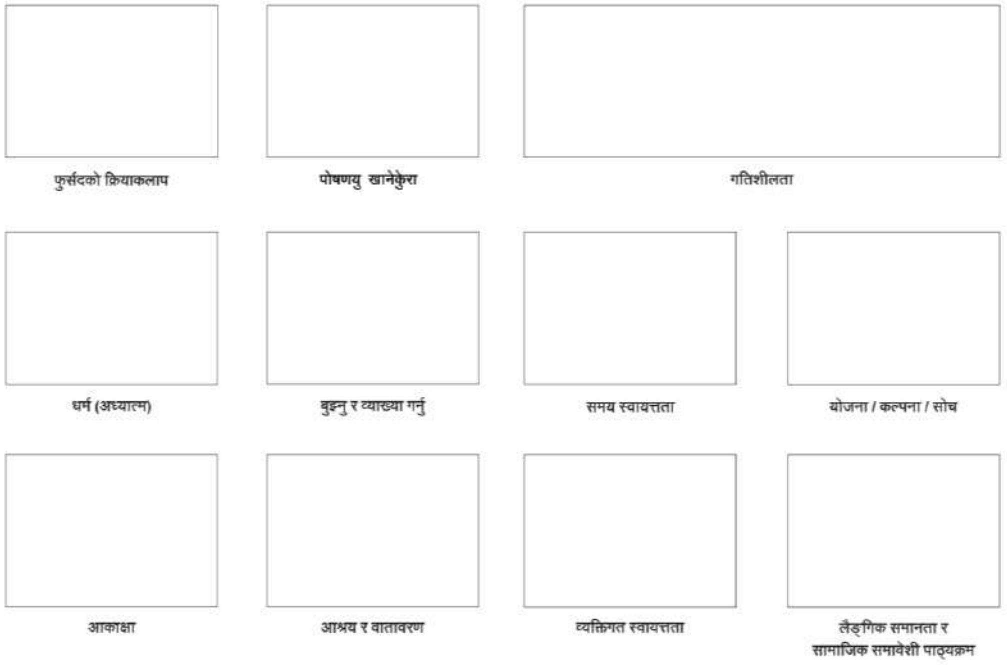
शारीरिक सुरक्षा

सामाजिक सम्बन्ध

आर्थिक र गैर-आर्थिक शोषणबाट मुक्ति

सम्मान

Figure B.5 Meaning-making (Understanding) example section (Part 2)



फुर्सदको क्रियाकलाप

पोषणयु खानेकुरा

गतिशीलता

धर्म (अध्यात्म)

बुझ्नु र व्याख्या गर्नु

समय स्वायत्तता

योजना / कल्पना / सोच

आकाक्षा

आश्रय र वातावरण

व्यक्तिगत स्वायत्तता

लैङ्गिक समानता र
सामाजिक समावेशी पाठ्यक्रम

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