

POLICY BRIEF



CHILDREN'S WELLBEING IN BHUTANESE SCHOOLS - WHY CAPABILITIES MATTER

WHAT'S AT STAKE?

Bhutan has made notable progress in expanding education access, yet there remains a critical gap in understanding how schools support the holistic well-being of children. Current studies tend to emphasize learning outcomes and opportunities, which, while useful, fail to capture what school-going children themselves value in their educational experiences. Sen's Capability Approach (CA) (1999) offers a powerful alternative by shifting the evaluative space from mere resource availability to the real freedoms school children have to lead lives they aspire and value.

This aligns with Bhutan's National Gender Equality Policy (2020) and National Education Policy (2024), which promote substantive equality and opportunities for all genders to reach their full potential. In education, the Capability Approach (CA) offers a framework to assess how schools support children's overall growth, focusing not just on outcomes but on the opportunities that help children become what they aspire and value (Drèze & Sen, 2013; Walker & Unterhalter, 2007; Hart, 2009; Hart & Brando, 2018). By focusing on what children are actually able to be and do, CA provides an alternative and context-sensitive way to evaluate educational success

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Improve infrastructure with equity and functionality as priority: Strengthen school infrastructure with usability, safety, and accessibility in mind especially for disabled children and marginalised groups. Prioritise inclusive access to the classroom, sanitation, sports, and recreational facilities.
- Eliminate mobility and nutritional barriers: Institutionalise school-level and locality-based action plans to improve children mobility and fulfill nutritional needs to prepare all students for healthy living and learning.
- Build student voice, autonomy, and leadership: Establish peer-driven spaces and frameworks for student voice and action. Enhance the conduct of co-curricular activities that enhance agency, confidence, and civic participation.
- Support GESI through curriculum and school culture: Embed gender equality, identity, and religious inclusivity in curricula and school culture.
- Capability-led, Whole-School Approach: Shift from access-based education towards a model that focuses on equality of outcomes, self-agency, and participation. Design institution-wide systems that connect intellectual and non-intellectual support to enable children's overall growth.

This study is the first in Bhutan to apply CA to assess children's well-being in schools. Conducted in five secondary schools in Samtse Dzongkhag, it identifies key factors shaping students' lived experiences and aspirations, with a focus on gender equality and social inclusion.

This brief shares findings from the research with an aim to inform teachers, educational stakeholders, curriculum developers, and policymakers within Bhutan's educational landscape, supporting evidence-based decisions that foster inclusive and equitable learning environments for all children.

METHODS

The analysis presented in this brief was conducted using the Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach, which integrates data collection with collaborative efforts to promote social change. This brief focuses on 16 educational capabilities identified collaboratively by students, teachers, researchers, and other educational stakeholders. A GESI diagnostic tool was designed and implemented to collect data on these capabilities. The GESI diagnostic survey tool assessed school resources and children's valued educational capabilities across 13 key indicators, exploring students' perceptions of resource availability, satisfaction, and importance in supporting their well-being.

The study was conducted in five secondary schools in Samtse Dzongkhag, selected for demographic diversity, rural-urban mix, socioeconomic variation, and prevalence of gender stereotypes. A total of 200 students, balanced by gender and grade (Grades I to X), participated, with four students per grade from each school. Ten teachers (one male and one female from each school) were also involved. Field notes, including written observations, photographs, and informal dialogues, were recorded during field visits to capture contextual and behavioral details beyond surveys. Photographs complemented these notes by documenting material and spatial aspects of the schools. Informal conversations with students, teachers, and principals helped clarify observations and ensured data credibility.

RESULTS

Table 1: *Descriptive Summary of Children's responses*

SL NO	Indicators	N	Mean	S. Dev
Education				
1	Availability Textbooks	200	3.771	1.18
2	Satisfaction Textbooks	200	3.80	1.18
3	Availability Stationary	200	3.78	1.50
4	Satisfaction Stationary	200	3.95	1.39
Nutritional Well-being				
5	Availability Provision of mid-day meal	200	4.67	.88
6	Satisfaction Provision of mid-day meal	200	4.41	.97
Physical Health				
7	Availability Safe and clean drinking water	200	4.41	.95
8	Satisfaction Safe and clean drinking water	200	4.17	1.03
Bodily Integrity				
9	Availability Playground	200	4.07	1.38
10	Satisfaction Playground	200	3.71	1.45
11	Availability Facilities inside the toilet	200	3.05	1.3
12	Satisfaction Facilities inside the toilet	200	2.89	1.3
13	Availability Disabled friendly infrastructure	200	3.20	1.69
14	Satisfaction Disabled friendly infrastructure	200	3.13	1.61
Understand, Interpret, Plan / Imagine and Think				
15	Availability Computers	200	4.18	1.06
16	Satisfaction Computers	200	3.80	1.24
Social Relations				
17	Availability Child Club	200	3.18	1.75
18	Satisfaction Child Club	200	3.09	1.61

Love, Care and Respect

School children in the study generally reported high levels of availability ($M = 4.29$), satisfaction ($M = 4.24$), and importance ($M = 4.67$) of love, care, and respect in their social relationships, underscoring their significance for emotional well-being. Field observations revealed culturally embedded practices, such as teachers supporting students beyond school hours and students expressing gratitude to teachers.

Education

School children reported overall favourable perceptions of educational resources, with a composite mean score of 4.30. Teachers received the highest importance rating ($M = 4.88$), whereas textbooks (availability $M = 3.77$; satisfaction $M = 3.80$) and stationery (availability $M = 3.78$; satisfaction $M = 3.95$) reflected notable gaps. Uniforms and whiteboards scored high on both availability and satisfaction, while availability and satisfaction of stationary was low. Despite teacher shortages and uneven resource distribution, field observation noted that teachers and staff often provided informal support to disadvantaged students, including access to teacher-led assistance and school-based initiatives.

Nutritional Well-being

School children's responses reflected positive perceptions of the mid-day meal programme, with a composite mean score of 4.64, indicating high levels of availability ($M = 4.67$), satisfaction ($M = 4.41$), and importance ($M = 4.84$). The low standard deviations indicate strong agreement across all five schools. Schools provided structured food and accommodation arrangements, as confirmed by field observations. Children reported regularly served balanced meals, though the menu choice is fixed and limited. Visual displays such as food pyramids and health tips were updated biweekly on the noticeboard specifically dedicated to nutritional information. Principals and teachers reported that breakfast, lunch, tea, fruits, and yogurts were provided daily.

Physical Health

School children expressed positive views regarding physical health resources, with a composite mean of 4.33. Safe and clean drinking water (availability $M = 4.41$; satisfaction $M = 4.17$; importance $M = 4.93$) and first aid (availability $M = 4.36$; satisfaction $M = 4.12$; importance $M = 4.85$) received high ratings. Playground access was valued ($M = 4.42$) but reflected slightly lower satisfaction ($M = 3.71$) and availability ($M = 4.07$). Field observations confirmed that four out of five schools had dedicated sporting facilities, while one school lacked such infrastructure, with students using the assembly ground for games. Both teachers and students acknowledged that the lack of proper facilities limited opportunities for physical and mental well-being.

Bodily Integrity

School children's responses on bodily integrity and inclusive infrastructure showed mixed perceptions, with a composite mean of 3.96 ($SD = 1.15$). Separate toilets for girls and boys were widely available ($M = 4.82$) and rated highly in importance ($M = 4.83$), but satisfaction with toilet facilities was low ($M = 2.89$). Sanitary pad provision received positive ratings for availability ($M = 3.92$) and importance ($M = 4.75$), with moderate satisfaction ($M = 3.71$). Disabled-friendly infrastructure scored low on availability ($M = 3.20$) and satisfaction ($M = 3.13$) despite being rated highly in importance ($M = 4.59$). Field data revealed issues with unhygienic toilets, water shortages, and poor sanitation.

Understand, Interpret, Plan / Imagine and Think

School children expressed generally positive perceptions of educational resources, with a composite mean of 4.37 ($SD = 0.94$). Libraries (availability $M = 4.33$; importance $M = 4.90$) and computers (availability $M = 4.18$; importance $M = 4.87$) were rated highly. Satisfaction was lower, particularly for computers ($M = 3.80$), indicating possible gaps in access and quality. Field observations confirmed the presence of libraries and computer labs across schools, though one school lacked adequate books, limiting opportunities for engagement.

Shelter and Environment

School children reported positive views of school infrastructure and learning environment, with a composite mean of 4.41 ($SD = 0.86$). High ratings were given to classroom space (availability $M = 4.42$; importance $M = 4.91$), desks and benches (availability $M = 4.32$; importance $M = 4.82$), built-up area (availability $M = 4.14$; importance $M = 4.76$), and electricity (availability $M = 4.34$; importance $M = 4.81$). However, satisfaction scores for built-up area ($M = 3.84$) and furniture ($M = 3.95$) were lower, pointing to concerns with overcrowding and worn-out furniture. Field observations confirmed that while basic infrastructure exists, improvements in quality are needed.

Social Relations

School children reported generally favourable perceptions of school-based social relations, with a composite mean of 4.17 ($SD = 1.01$).

Parent-teacher meetings (availability $M = 4.79$; satisfaction $M = 4.70$; importance $M = 4.93$) were highly rated, reflecting their role in strengthening school-home collaboration. Child clubs, however, received lower ratings in availability ($M = 3.18$) and satisfaction ($M = 3.09$), despite being valued ($M = 4.35$), suggesting limited opportunities for peer engagement. Field data confirmed that PTMs were conducted regularly and flexibly. However, child club participation tended to favour older students, limiting younger students' access to peer-led activities. While clubs for upper grades included varieties, younger students (Pre-Primary to Grade VI) primarily participated in Scouting. Participation was reported to be gender-balanced, with photographs confirming equitable access.

Participation

School children's responses regarding extracurricular participation reflected a positive outlook, with a composite mean of 4.42 ($SD = 0.90$). Availability ($M = 4.36$) and satisfaction ($M = 4.12$) were rated highly, while importance scored highest ($M = 4.80$). The gap between satisfaction and importance suggests areas for improvement in accessibility and diversity of these clubs. Field observations noted a wide range of weekly after-school activities, including games, sports, literary events, and various clubs. While schools accommodate engagement well, challenges such as planning, transportation and age-inclusivity remain.



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