

- Autonomy was most positively perceived in Tashithang MSS (M = 9.47), with Peljorling HSS (M = 8.44) and Yoseltse HSS (M = 8.41) showing lower means and greater inconsistencies.
- On social relations, Tashithang MSS (M = 9.73) had the highest and most consistent ratings, while Peljorling HSS (M = 8.96) showed more varied student experiences. The existence of low-end responses particularly Peljorling HSS indicates possible omissions in the social support that might have been influenced by certain groups of children that are anti-social or have difficulty in forming social bonds.
- Freedom from economic and non-economic exploitation was assessed through variables such as awareness and protection rights (I get/gotten information about my legal rights to protect myself from exploitation), Right to regular school attendance (I attend/attended school regularly without being asked to miss it for work or household chores), and Balance between school work and household chores (I give/given more time to study than time for work (household work)). It was highly rated in Tashithang MSS (M = 9.58) and Gomtu MSS (M = 9.19), with lower scores and higher variation in Yoseltse HSS and Peljorling HSS. This variation suggests for need of targeted interventions including school programmes that safeguard learning time, regular school attendance, and awareness on legal rights and protection in ensuring that no children are left behind due to economic and non-economic exploitation.
- Participation in school life was strongest in Tendruk CS (M = 9.66), while Yoseltse HSS (M = 8.21) and Peljorling HSS (M = 8.34) reflected relatively lower inclusion. The broader range in these schools suggest that while some students foster equitable participation, others may experience lower involvement in both academic and extracurricular contexts.
- Children generally viewed the GESI curriculum positively, but with disparities. Tashithang MSS (M = 9.79) had the highest score, while Peljorling HSS (M = 8.47) and Yoseltse HSS (M = 7.81) had the lowest, revealing gaps in GESI-related content coverage.

CONCLUSION

The analysis revealed that students generally perceive their school environments positively, with most mean scores ranging between 7.81 and 9.79. High perceptions were recorded in areas such as bodily integrity, autonomy, shelter, and mobility, with Tashithang MSS consistently scoring the highest across several domains while Yoseltse HSS and Peljorling HSS exhibiting lower means and greater inconsistencies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Provides an overview as to how researchers are attempting to measure capability and inform decision and policy making, particularly in the education field.
- Provide school-specific interventions to reduce disparities, particularly in schools with higher variation in scores (e.g., Yoseltse HSS and Peljorling HSS).
- Implement structured mental well-being programs and aspiration-building efforts to ensure consistent emotional support across schools.
- Foster inclusive environments that promote equity in autonomy, social bonding, and participation, especially for vulnerable or marginalised groups.
- Strengthen the integration of GESI content within the curriculum across all schools to ensure children's right to information, inclusion, and empowerment.
- Promote student voice and participatory learning approaches that enhance agency freedom and long-term educational success.

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Disclaimers

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POLICY BRIEF

Promoting Well-being and Agency through Children's Valued Educational Capabilities



LEARNING,
INNOVATION &
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SUMMARY

This baseline study assessed children's perceptions of agency and wellbeing freedom and achievement, focusing on sixteen valued educational capabilities identified through a situational analysis conducted in five secondary schools in Samtse Dzongkhag to ensure safe, inclusive, and equitable learning environment. The analysis revealed that students generally perceive their school environments positively, with most mean scores ranging between 7.81 and 9.79. High perceptions were recorded in areas such as bodily integrity, autonomy, shelter, and mobility, with Tashithang MSS consistently scoring the highest across several domains.

However, the presence of outliers and significant variation in schools like Yoseltse HSS and Peljorling HSS indicates inconsistent experiences, particularly in mental well-being, aspiration, and educational participation. For instance, mean scores for mental well-being ranged from 7.89 to 9.24, showing gaps in emotional support and understanding.

Importantly, while students generally rated the curriculum positively (mean scores as high as 9.79), schools like Peljorling HSS and Yoseltse HSS reported lower means ($M = 8.47$ and $M = 7.81$) and greater variability, indicating that not all children experienced the curriculum as equally inclusive. This points to the need for enhanced curricular efforts to support children's right to information on GESI, health, hygiene, legal rights, and inclusion.

Overall, the findings call for targeted and contextual interventions to address equity gaps, inform safe, supportive, and inclusive school policies and improve the overall school environment.

BACKGROUND

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

CA as an evaluative framework was introduced in 1979 for assessing individual well-being (Sen, 1980). Since then, several agencies have applied it to evaluate individual wellbeing and social justice. CA was

also employed to understand the role of education in promoting human flourishing (DrĖze & Sen 2013; Hart, 2009) as this approach places children at centre stage by focusing on the processes whereby they flourish because of the opportunities provided by the school, in turn allowing students to value and aspire what they want to be and to become (Hart & Brando, 2018).

In this study, using the Participatory action research (PAR), this baseline study applied CA to assess children's perceptions of agency and wellbeing freedom and achievement by focusing on the sixteen valued educational capabilities identified through a situational analysis conducted in five secondary schools within Samtse Dzongkhag. Furthermore, it explored how these capabilities are developed and supported in Bhutanese educational settings. This research addresses a significant gap, as no such study has yet been conducted within the Bhutanese school context.

METHODOLOGY

Using a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach, the study involved children from Grades I to X across five participating schools in Samtse Dzongkhag. A total of 200 students (two females and two males) from each grade level, participated in the GESI diagnostic survey. A total of 200 students including two females and two males from each grade level) participated in the GESI diagnostic survey. A random yet strategically balanced sampling method was employed to ensure gender equity and representation across all participating schools. The children ranged in age from 6 to 19 years, with a composite mean age of 12.

The diagnostic survey instrument evaluated children's valued educational capabilities using 16 indicators comprising 130 items. These indicators included: 1) Love, care and respect, 2) Education, 3) Nutritional well-being, 4) Aspiration, 5) Physical health, 6) Bodily integrity, 7) The ability to understand, interpret, plan/imagine and think, 8) Religion and identity, 9) Shelter and environment, 10) Mental well-being, 11) Social relations, 12) Autonomy, 13) Freedom from economic and non-economic exploitation, 14) Participation, 15) Mobility, and 16) Gender Equality and Social Inclusion curriculum. Each capability was evaluated using the four core well-being metrics: i) Well-being freedom, ii) Well-being achievement, iii) Agency freedom, and iv) Agency achievement. An approval to conduct the research in five schools of Samtse Dzongkhag was solicited from the Ministry of Education and Skills Development (MoESD).

FINDINGS

This baseline study explored school children's perceptions of well-being, agency freedom, and achievement across five Bhutanese schools using a capability-based framework. The analysis revealed an overall positive perception of support and inclusion, with mean scores across domains ranging from 7.81 to 9.79.

- Educational success was measured through personal attributes that contribute to educational achievement and progression. Key indicators included concentration, classroom participation, engagement in indoor games, regular attendance, grade progression, time dedicated to studying or hard work, and the development of positive habits. Educational success was generally rated highly, with Tashithang MSS ($M = 9.59$) showing the strongest perception of equitable learning, while Tendruk CS ($M = 9.01$) revealed greater variation in responses. This variation provides a useful baseline for assessing school-level practices to support educational success that will likely lead to accomplishment of both wellbeing and agency achievements.
- Mental wellbeing was measured through variables that include school/home safety and secureness (I feel/felt happy when I come to school/I..... feel/felt scared or afraid when I'm in school), choice and autonomy in emotional expression (I decide/decided when and with whom to share my feelings (friends, families, teachers), and emotional resilience and regulations (I find/found ways to stay positive when I am facing difficulties in school). Mental well-being scored highest in Tendruk CS ($M = 9.24$) and Gomtu MSS ($M = 9.20$), while lower and more variable scores were noted in Peljorling HSS ($M = 7.95$) and Yoseltse HSS ($M = 7.89$), indicating inconsistencies in emotional support. This variation suggests a more inconsistent pattern in children's understanding of emotional well-being, indicating possible gaps in the support systems or the overall school climate in these settings.
- Aspiration was perceived positively overall, but imbalances across schools suggest unequal opportunities to dream and plan for the future.
- Bodily integrity, shelter and environment, and physical health had high mean scores, such as Tashithang MSS ($M = 9.43$) for shelter and $M = 9.48$ for mobility. However, outliers point to marginalized experiences that need addressing.
- Religious freedom and identity were rated between 8.86 (Peljorling HSS) and 9.57 (Tashithang MSS), with wider spreads in some schools indicating a need to strengthen inclusive spiritual spaces.