Policy Brief

Strengthening Child-Centred and Inclusive Education in Bhutan: Findings from a Baseline and Endline Assessment of Children's Valued Educational Capabilities

Summary

The baseline and endline diagnostic tool examined children's assessment of sixteen valued educational capabilities across four dimensions: well-being freedom, well-being achievement, agency freedom, and agency achievement. The findings indicate that children generally reported high levels of perceived capabilities, although changes varied across domains. Improvements were observed in areas such as autonomy, aspiration, mobility, physical health, mental well-being, and access to GESI-related learning. However, declines in some areas, particularly mental well-being under agency freedom, nutritional well-being, participation, and religion and identity, highlight continuing concerns regarding children's emotional well-being, opportunities for choice, and meaningful participation.

Overall, the findings underscore the importance of strengthening child-centred, safe, inclusive, and equitable learning environments. They point to the need for targeted interventions that promote children's agency, support emotional well-being, improve opportunities for participation, and ensure access to inclusive educational information. Regular consultation with children and follow-up assessments can help schools and policymakers identify persistent gaps and design responsive interventions. While the findings reveal changes between baseline and endline, further investigation is needed to understand the factors underlying these changes and the contribution of the LIKE Club intervention.

Background

A capability-driven LIKE Club intervention was implemented in five schools in Samtse Dzongkhag, Bhutan, to promote Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) in schools. Each school had 40 LIKE Club members from Grades I–X, with equal gender representation, bringing the total number of participating students to 200. The intervention was implemented by two GESI focal teachers.

The year-long intervention, conducted from July 2025 to July 2026, involved developing and implementing activities focused on 16 children's valued educational capabilities through LIKE Club initiatives. The intervention aimed to strengthen children's opportunities, choices, participation, and well-being in school.

What Is the Capability Approach?

The Capability Approach, developed by economist and philosopher Amartya Sen (1999) and further advanced by philosopher Martha Nussbaum (2011), focuses on people's real opportunities to achieve the things they value in life. Rather than measuring well-being solely through resources or educational outcomes, it considers whether individuals have the freedom and opportunity to make meaningful choices and achieve valued ways of being and doing.

In education, this approach emphasises children's opportunities to participate, express themselves, make decisions, build relationships, and develop their aspirations in inclusive and supportive learning environments. It provides a useful framework for promoting GESI by examining not only what children achieve but also the opportunities and freedoms available to them.

Methodology

A GESI diagnostic survey tool was administered to 200 students at the end of the intervention to assess children's perceptions of their valued educational capabilities and the perceived effectiveness of the LIKE Club intervention. Amongst the 200 respondents, 100 were male, 99 female with 1 in the other category. Descriptive analysis was conducted and the findings were compared with baseline data to examine changes in children's perceptions across 16 capability domains.

The assessment examined four dimensions:

- **Well-being Freedom:** Children's perceived ability and opportunities to achieve valued aspects of well-being.
- **Well-being Achievement:** Children's perceived experiences and achievements related to well-being.
- **Agency Freedom:** Children's perceived opportunities to make choices and decisions about matters they value.
- **Agency Achievement:** Children's perceived experiences of making and acting on those choices.

Scores were measured on a scale of 1 to 10, with higher scores indicating stronger perceived capabilities in the relevant dimension.

Key Findings

The figure below presents the highest- and lowest-scoring capability domains at baseline and endline across the four dimensions of well-being and agency freedom and achievement. The comparison highlights areas of strength and domains in which children's perceived capabilities declined or may require further attention.

As shown in Table 1, scores ranged from 8.59 to 9.27 at baseline and 8.53 to 9.41 at endline. Mental Well-being showed the largest increase, rising from 8.59 to 9.13 (+0.54), followed by Autonomy (+0.43) and Aspiration (+0.38). These improvements suggest that children perceive greater opportunities to support their mental well-being, make personal choices, and develop future aspirations. Nutritional Well-being recorded the largest decline, falling from 8.91 to 8.53 (−0.38), while Religion and Identity and GESI Curriculum each declined by 0.25 points. These findings highlight the need to strengthen children's opportunities to access nutritious food, practise their identities freely, and engage meaningfully with inclusive learning.

Table 1: Well-being Freedom

Capability Domain	***Baseline***	***Endline***
Aspiration	8.74	9.12
Autonomy	8.77	9.20
Bodily Integrity	9.19	9.29
Education	9.20	9.23
Freedom from Exploitation	9.09	9.15
GESI Curriculum	9.04	8.79
Love, Care and Respect	9.26	9.41
Mental Well-being	8.59	9.13
Mobility	8.91	8.94
Nutritional Well-being	8.91	8.53
Participation	9.06	9.10

Physical Health	8.91	8.98
Religion and Identity	9.26	9.01
Shelter and Environment	8.97	9.14
Social Relations	9.27	9.08
UIPIT	9.00	9.05

As reflected in Table 2, scores ranged from 8.35 to 9.30 at baseline and 8.78 to 9.28 at endline. Mobility recorded the largest increase, rising from 8.35 to 9.00 (+0.65), followed by Physical Health (+0.40) and GESI Curriculum (+0.32). These changes indicate more positive reported experiences of mobility, health-supporting conditions, and access to GESI-related learning. Conversely, UIPIT declined by 0.20 points, Social Relations by 0.15, and Nutritional Well-being by 0.03. Continued attention to creative and critical thinking, supportive relationships, and children's nutritional needs is therefore warranted.

Table 2: Well-being Achievement

Capability Domain	***Baseline***	***Endline***
Aspiration	9.14	9.15
Autonomy	8.95	9.13
Bodily Integrity	9.07	9.08
Education	9.10	9.21
Freedom from Exploitation	9.08	9.09
GESI Curriculum	8.82	9.14
Love, Care and Respect	8.94	9.17
Mental Well-being	8.53	8.78
Mobility	8.35	9.00
Nutritional Well-being	8.87	8.84
Participation	8.88	9.00
Physical Health	8.62	9.02
Religion and Identity	9.19	9.16

Shelter and Environment	9.3	9.28
Social Relations	9.24	9.09
UIPIT	9.08	8.88

As indicated in Table 3, scores ranged from 8.66 to 9.31 at baseline and 7.84 to 9.26 at endline. GESI Curriculum and Physical Health recorded the largest increases, both rising by 0.22 points. These improvements suggest greater perceived opportunities to access GESI-related knowledge and engage in activities supporting physical well-being. However, Mental Well-being declined substantially, from 8.66 to 7.84 (−0.82), while Religion and Identity fell by 0.30 and Nutritional Well-being by 0.28. The decline in Mental Well-being requires particular attention, including further exploration of children's emotional experiences at school and their opportunities to express feelings and seek support.

Table 3: Agency Freedom

Capability Domain	***Baseline***	***Endline***
Aspiration	9.17	9.03
Autonomy	9.09	9.13
Bodily Integrity	9.14	9.12
Education	9.31	9.26
Freedom from Exploitation	9.07	9.23
GESI Curriculum	8.89	9.11
Love, Care and Respect	9.08	9.06
Mental Well-being	8.66	7.84
Mobility	8.93	8.99
Nutritional Well-being	8.94	8.66
Participation	9.04	8.93
Physical Health	8.90	9.12
Religion and Identity	9.30	9.00
Shelter and Environment	9.20	9.23
Social Relations	9.25	9.12

UIPIT	8.99	9.16

Table 4 presents scores across capabilities which range from 8.68 to 9.33 at baseline and 8.83 to 9.25 at endline. Mental Well-being recorded the largest increase (+0.35), followed by Bodily Integrity (+0.18) and Freedom from Exploitation (+0.17). These changes suggest more positive reported experiences of emotional well-being, safety, and protection. Autonomy recorded the largest decline (−0.25), followed by Religion and Identity (−0.24) and Participation (−0.19). These findings highlight the importance of strengthening children's ability to make age-appropriate choices, participate in classroom and school activities, and exercise their agency in everyday life.

Table 4: Agency Achievement

Capability Domain	***Baseline***	***Endline***
Aspiration	9.04	8.98
Autonomy	9.08	8.83
Bodily Integrity	8.96	9.14
Education	9.31	9.19
Freedom from Exploitation	9.08	9.25
GESI Curriculum	8.99	9.13
Love, Care and Respect	9.05	9.18
Mental Well-being	8.68	9.03
Mobility	8.89	8.97
Nutritional Well-being	9.01	8.84
Participation	9.15	8.96
Physical Health	8.86	8.94
Religion and Identity	9.33	9.09
Shelter and Environment	9.31	9.21
Social Relations	9.24	9.15
UIPIT	9.06	9.12

Conclusion and Recommendations

The baseline and endline findings show mixed changes across the 16 capability domains during the LIKE Club intervention. Improvements in selected areas of mental well-being, autonomy, mobility, physical health, and GESI-related learning are encouraging. However, declines in nutritional well-being, religion and identity, participation, and particularly Agency Freedom in Mental Well-being indicate that children's opportunities and experiences remain uneven.

From a Capability Approach perspective, promoting GESI requires more than providing resources or activities; it requires ensuring that children have meaningful opportunities to make choices, participate, develop aspirations, and achieve valued outcomes.

The following actions are recommended:

1. **Strengthen child participation and agency:** Provide regular opportunities for children to express their views, ask questions, make age-appropriate decisions, and influence activities affecting them.
2. **Prioritise mental well-being:** Establish supportive school environments where children feel safe, can share their feelings, and can seek help without fear.
3. **Promote nutrition and inclusive learning:** Review children's access to nutritious food and strengthen curriculum-based learning on gender equality, social inclusion, religious tolerance, and disability inclusion.
4. **Strengthen LIKE Clubs:** Continue child-centred, participatory activities that promote autonomy, aspiration, safety, positive relationships, and freedom from exploitation.
5. **Monitor capability changes:** Use regular child feedback and follow-up assessments to identify areas of improvement and emerging concerns.

Limitations

The findings are based on baseline and endline scores and therefore show changes in children's reported capabilities over the intervention period. The comparison alone cannot establish that the LIKE Club intervention caused these changes. Scores also do not explain why particular capabilities increased or declined. Further qualitative inquiry with children, teachers, and parents, alongside continued monitoring, would help explain the findings and guide future action.

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Acknowledgment

This work was supported by the Global Partnership for Education Knowledge and Innovation Exchange, a joint endeavour with the International Development Research Centre, Canada.