Policy Brief

Children's Well-being and Agency Across Ethnic Groups in Bhutan

Summary

This policy brief presents findings from the baseline and endline assessment of children's valued educational capabilities across ethnic groups in five secondary schools in Samtse Dzongkhag, Bhutan. Guided by the Capability Approach, the assessment examined children's perceived opportunities and actual experiences across four dimensions: Well-being Freedom, Well-being Achievement, Agency Freedom, and Agency Achievement. Overall, children reported generally high levels of well-being and agency, although differences emerged across ethnic groups and capability domains. Mental well-being, nutritional well-being, autonomy, and participation were areas of particular concern for some groups. The findings highlight the need for inclusive, child-centred school policies that respond to diverse experiences and ensure equitable opportunities for all children.

Background

Every child should have the opportunity to learn, participate, feel safe, and develop their capabilities, regardless of their ethnic background. However, children's experiences of education and well-being may differ according to their social, cultural, family, and school contexts. Understanding these differences is important for promoting gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) in Bhutanese schools.



The research-for-development project Promoting Gender Equality and Social Inclusion in Schools: Building on What Children Want to Do and Be applies the Capability Approach to understand what children value and their opportunities to achieve these valued ways of being and doing. The assessment examined sixteen valued educational capability domains to identify strengths, gaps, and changes in

children's well-being and agency. Examining findings by ethnicity can help inform educational policies and interventions that recognise diversity and promote more equitable learning environments.



Methodology

The study conducted assessment of children's valued educational capabilities n five secondary schools in Samtse Dzongkhag, Bhutan. Data were analysed by ethnicity across sixteen valued educational capability domains, grouped into four dimensions:

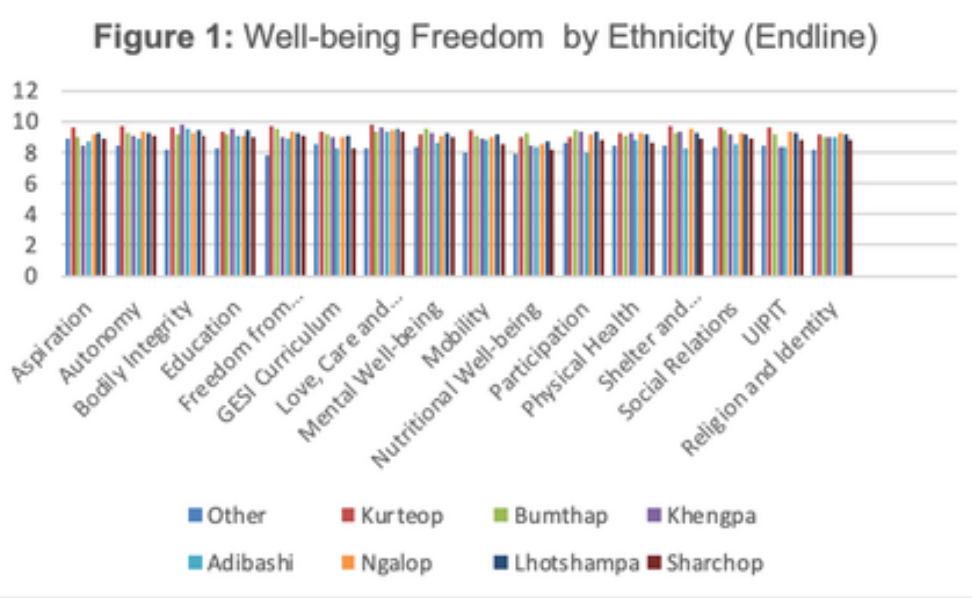
- Well-being Freedom: children's perceived ability to achieve valued aspects of well-being.
- Well-being Achievement: children's reported experiences and outcomes related to well-being.
- Agency Freedom: children's perceived opportunities to make choices and decisions.
- Agency Achievement: children's reported exercise of choice and agency in practice.

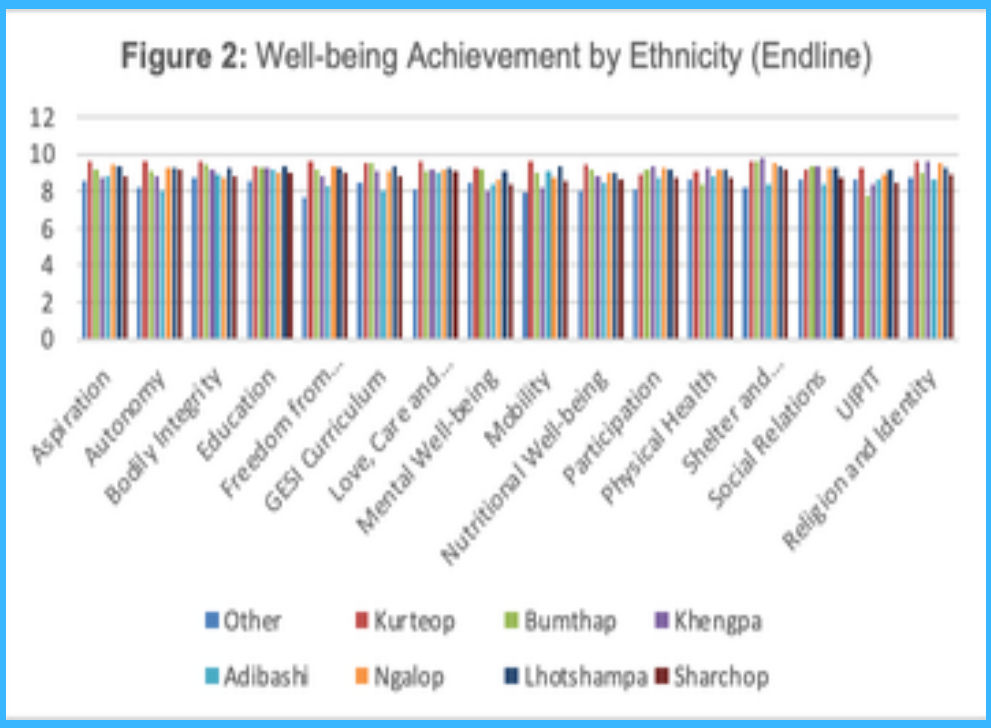
Mean scores were compared across ethnic groups and between baseline and endline to identify patterns of strengths, changes, and areas requiring further attention. The analysis considered differences in the representation of ethnic groups and changes in category labels between the two assessments. Consequently, findings are interpreted descriptively, with caution applied to comparisons involving smaller groups or categories that may not be directly comparable.

Results

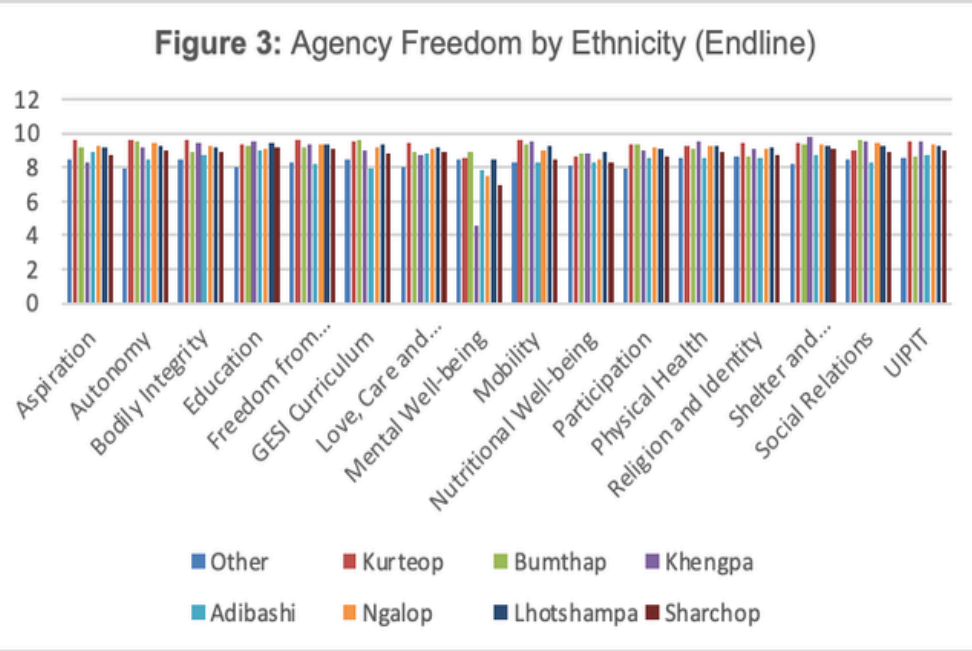
The findings indicate generally positive perceptions of well-being and agency across ethnic groups, particularly in education, social relations, bodily integrity, freedom from exploitation, and religion and identity. The larger respondent groups (Lhotshampa, Sharchop, and Ngalop) generally demonstrated consistent and positive patterns across several domains.

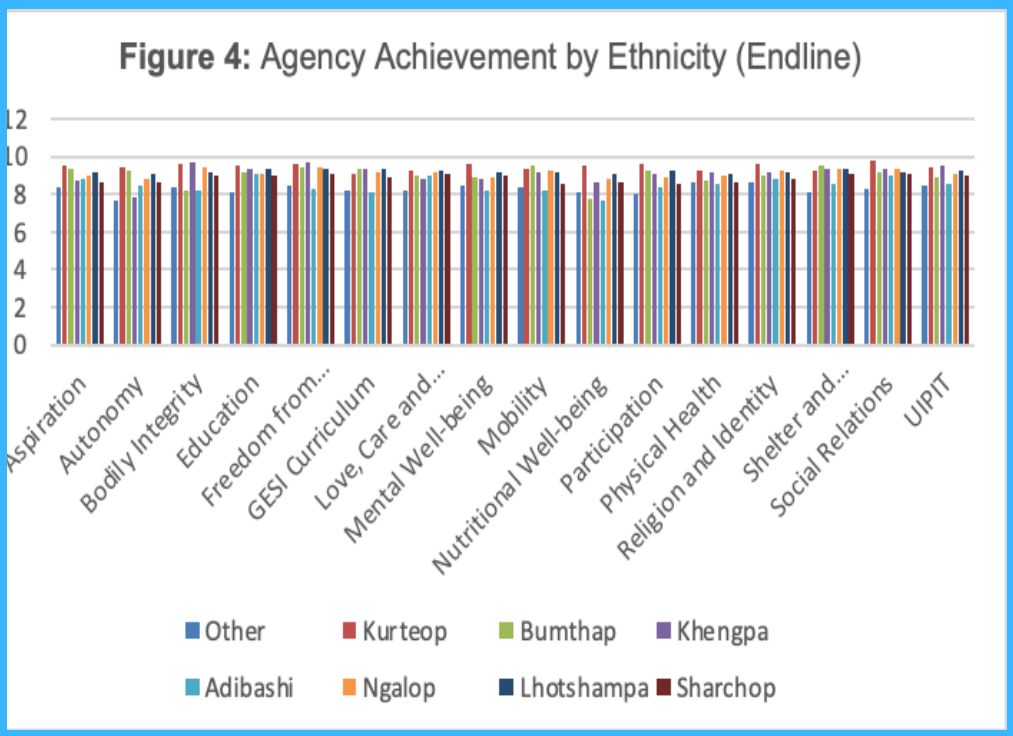
However, changes varied by group and capability domain. Bumthap children showed a substantial improvement in Well-being Freedom related to nutrition, increasing from 6.57 at baseline to 9.24 at endline. Khengpa children reported improvements in Well-being Freedom related to shelter and environment (8.03 to 9.33) and mental well-being (8.04 to 9.25). Lhotshampa and Sharchop children also showed improvements in mental well-being freedom.





Despite these positive changes, mental well-being remained an important concern. In Agency Freedom, the endline score for Khengpa children was 4.58, while Sharchop and Ngalop children recorded 6.94 and 7.48, respectively. Nutritional well-being and autonomy also remained comparatively low for some groups. For example, Agency Achievement in nutritional well-being was 7.69 among Adibashi children and 7.76 among Bumthap children at the endline.





The findings should not be interpreted as evidence that one ethnic group consistently experiences better outcomes than another. Smaller group sizes may influence mean scores, and differences between baseline and endline ethnic categories limit some direct comparisons. The results instead highlight domain-specific strengths and challenges that warrant attention.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

The assessment suggests that children across ethnic groups generally experience positive levels of well-being and agency, but these experiences are not uniform across all capability domains. Improvements in selected areas demonstrate encouraging changes, while concerns related to mental well-being, nutrition, autonomy, and participation point to the need for sustained and targeted support.

The following policy actions are recommended:

1. Prioritise children's mental well-being. Strengthen school-based emotional support, provide safe spaces for children to express their feelings, and ensure they can seek help without fear or discrimination.

2. Promote meaningful participation and agency. Provide regular opportunities for children from all backgrounds to express their views, contribute to school decisions, and participate in extracurricular and classroom activities.

3. Strengthen nutritional well-being. Review children's access to adequate and nutritious food and explore age-appropriate ways for them to express their dietary needs and preferences.

4. Enhance culturally inclusive education. Strengthen curriculum and school activities addressing gender equality, social inclusion, respect for cultural diversity, and equitable treatment.

5. Improve disaggregated monitoring. Continue assessing children's valued capabilities by ethnicity while accounting for sample sizes, protecting confidentiality, and ensuring consistent ethnic categories across assessment periods.

Overall, educational policies should move beyond aggregate achievement measures to consider whether children have meaningful opportunities to exercise agency and achieve the forms of well-being they value. A child-centred and inclusive approach can help schools respond to diverse needs and ensure that every child, irrespective of ethnic background, has the opportunity to flourish.

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