



Mapping the School Environment: Exploring Key Elements through Students' and Teachers' Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

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This study investigated the elements within educational environments that students and teachers perceive as critical for advancing gender equality and social inclusion. Using a Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology, focus group interviews were conducted with students (boys and girls) and teachers across five schools in Samtse Dzongkhag. Participants were asked to identify and reflect on the key aspects they consider important for promoting inclusion and gender equality within their school environments. The findings revealed distinct priorities between the groups. Boys and teachers primarily emphasized the importance of physical infrastructure, such as school buildings, playgrounds, and gender-sensitive facilities, viewing these as essential to fostering gender equality. In contrast, girls highlighted social and emotional aspects, including equal treatment, access to resources, and the need for a supportive school culture. The study underscored the importance of integrating both physical and non-physical elements to create inclusive and equitable educational spaces. These insights provide valuable evidence to inform practices and policies that promote gender equality and social inclusion in schools.

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INTRODUCTION

This study is part of the larger collaborative project Promoting Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) in Schools: Building on What Children Value and Aspire to Do and Be, a joint initiative involving Kathmandu University School of Arts (Nepal), RDRS (Bangladesh), and Samtse College of Education (Bhutan). Grounded in the Capability Approach (Sen, 1999; Walker, 2007), this research seeks to explore how educational environments can support the values and aspirations of students, fostering opportunities that enable them to lead meaningful lives. The primary aim of this study is to investigate the elements within the educational setting that both students and teachers view as significant, with an emphasis on advancing gender equality and social inclusion. By examining what students perceive as important in their school environments, this research aims to inform practices that respond to their needs and aspirations,

with a particular focus on promoting social inclusivity and gender equity within the educational setting.

The role of school environments in shaping students' experiences of gender equality and social inclusion is critical, as educational settings are sites where both material and social factors intersect to influence learning outcomes (Connell, 2009; Stromquist, 2007). As highlighted in the literature, school facilities such as gender-sensitive resources, including separate toilets for girls and provisions for menstrual hygiene, are essential in reducing barriers to education, particularly for girls (Sommer et al., 2015; UNESCO, 2020). The availability of such facilities has been linked to lower absenteeism and dropout rates, thereby supporting greater participation in education. Moreover, gendered perceptions of school resources often influence students' engagement and sense of inclusion within the school environment (Murphy & Whitelegg, 2006; Guerrero, 2023). Thus, understanding what students identify as crucial within their educational environments is vital to fostering an atmosphere that promotes both gender equality and social inclusion.

One of the critical aspects of achieving gender equality in education is the availability and quality of school resources, particularly infrastructure. Gender-sensitive facilities, such as separate toilets for girls and provisions for menstrual hygiene, have been shown to significantly reduce barriers to education for female students. The absence of such resources, especially in rural areas, is linked to higher absenteeism and dropout rates among girls (Sommer et al., 2015). Lack of private and safe spaces for girls in schools often results in a sense of insecurity, further limiting their participation (UNESCO, 2020). In many marginalized communities, schools face inadequate resources that disproportionately affect girls, including poorly maintained classrooms, lack of learning materials, and limited access to technology, which often disadvantages girls compared to boys (Unterhalter, 2013), highlighting the need to prioritize the allocation of resources to ensure gender-sensitive facilities and equal access for all students.

While some regions have made significant strides in improving the availability of gender-sensitive educational resources, gaps persist in many parts of the world, particularly where cultural and societal norms constrain the educational opportunities of girls. For instance, in certain countries, girls' education is often deprioritized in favor of boys', with families allocating fewer resources to send girls to school, especially when economic pressures or traditional beliefs about gender roles dictate that girls stay home to assist with domestic chores (Crenshaw, 2013). This lack of prioritization often results in lower educational attainment for girls and limits their future opportunities.

Gender-sensitive resources, such as gender-neutral bathrooms, accessible sports facilities, and safe spaces for girls, are vital for creating an inclusive

environment, particularly in contexts where inadequate resources may exacerbate gendered experiences (Connell, 2009). Traditional physical education often favors male participation, with girls having limited access to certain sports and activities (). This disparity is driven by societal stereotypes linking physical strength and leadership with boys, while girls are steered toward less demanding tasks. This is highlighted by Ramos and Hernández (2014) who states that gender inequalities often emerge when teachers fail to intervene during the organization of groups for physical activities, resulting in non-mixed groups where boys and girls rarely interact. This lack of interaction reinforces gendered divisions and limits opportunities for collaboration. Additionally, physical and sports activities are often designed with male interests in mind, with fewer options tailored to the preferences of female students.

A key theme emerging from the literature is the intersection of physical and social infrastructure in fostering a gender-equitable school environment. Achieving true gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) in education requires a comprehensive, holistic approach that integrates both physical and social infrastructure. While physical facilities such as classrooms, playgrounds, and sports areas are foundational components of a gender-equitable educational environment, these must be supported by structural reforms that address social, cultural, and economic factors (Unterhalter, 2005). Teacher training and policy reforms that address gender biases and stereotypes in teaching methods, curricula, and classroom interactions are necessary to complement the physical environment. Thus, school policies promoting GESI must go beyond providing equal access to physical resources. They must address broader socio-economic factors, including poverty, economic inequality, and access to technology, which disproportionately affect marginalized groups, particularly girls in low-income or rural areas (Unterhalter, 2005). A dual investment in physical infrastructure and the social aspects of schooling—such as teacher training, inclusive curricula, and gender-sensitive policies—can foster long-term social change. By addressing both tangible and intangible factors, schools can better support gender equality and create educational opportunities for all students. Addressing these factors requires a deeper engagement with the socio-economic contexts that shape students' educational experiences (Unterhalter, 2005).

In this study, students and teachers were asked to map out the 'people,' 'places,' and 'things' they consider pivotal within their educational environments. The study aimed to gather perspectives that highlight the values and priorities of both teachers and students, providing insights into how these elements influence the learning environment and relate to broader issues of social inclusion and gender equality. By examining the perceptions of students and teachers, the research identifies shared and differing viewpoints on what

constitutes a meaningful and inclusive educational experience. Ultimately, this study contributes to the broader initiative by offering empirical evidence that informs the development of inclusive educational practices that promote equity, inclusivity, and gender equality, ensuring educational spaces are responsive to the diverse values and aspirations of all learners.

The issue of gender equality in education has gained significant attention in recent decades, with an increasing focus on how school resources influence educational opportunities for students of different genders. Gender equality in education is not only about ensuring equal access to education but also about addressing structural barriers that impact boys and girls differently. This literature review examines studies on how school facilities and structures impact students' gendered experiences and affect gender equality in educational settings.

RESEARCH METHOD

The study adopted a Participatory Action Research (PAR) framework and focused on the Participation Axis for its situational analysis. Data were collected from students and teachers across five schools in Samtse Dzongkhag through focus group interviews (FGI), capturing their perspectives on valued elements within school premises. The study site was strategically chosen based on its geographic location, cultural diversity, and the presence of gender stereotypes in the region. Ethical research procedures were upheld, including obtaining prior consent from schools and participants, ensuring fairness in participant selection, and maintaining anonymity and confidentiality to encourage genuine responses. Focus group interviews were conducted with students (10 boys and 10 girls) and teachers (1 male and 1 female) from the five schools, where they were asked to create drawings representing these elements. The drawings were then analyzed for recurring themes.

The analysis of the collected data involved visualizing the findings through word clouds to identify the most prominent ideas and priorities. The words and phrases extracted from the drawings created during the focus group interviews were systematically analyzed. These terms were input into a word cloud generator, where the frequency of specific words dictated their prominence. Words that appeared more frequently were displayed in larger font size, allowing for a clear visual representation of the elements most frequently highlighted by the participants. This method offered a concise and effective means of understanding the shared values and priorities of students and teachers, as well as highlighting both common and divergent perspectives on what is most valued within the school environment.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

The research explored how students and teachers perceive the school environment in terms of promoting Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI). Students and teachers were asked to depict the elements they value most within their school premises, and the findings were analyzed through recurring themes presented in word clouds. The perspectives of boys, girls, and teachers revealed distinct priorities and common themes that highlight both the physical and social components of a school environment that promote GESI.

Boys' and Teachers' Emphasis on Physical Infrastructure

Boys and teachers placed considerable importance on physical infrastructure, identifying elements such as the 'school building,' 'playground,' and 'dining hall' as key factors that promote GESI. Boys highlighted these tangible elements, seeing them as essential to creating inclusive spaces. The role of teachers as a central figure also emerged as important for fostering an equitable and supportive school culture (see Figure. 1).

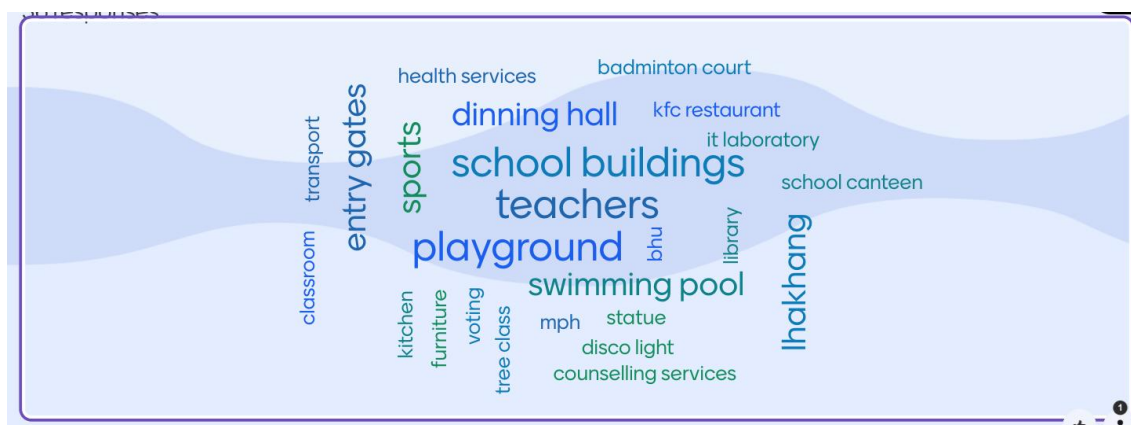


Figure 1. Word cloud of School Mapping through Boys' Arts

The importance of physical infrastructure, such as school buildings, playgrounds, and dining halls, is a key aspect in fostering inclusive environments. Boys emphasized that these tangible spaces are foundational for ensuring equal participation and comfort for all students. By focusing on these elements, they perceive such spaces as essential for providing equitable opportunities for every student, helping to create an environment where everyone feels valued and safe. The design and quality of physical spaces within schools are seen as directly impacting the ability to challenge existing norms and foster a sense of inclusivity.



Figure 2. Word cloud of School Mapping through Teachers' Arts

Teachers also recognize the significance of physical infrastructure in promoting inclusivity, particularly highlighting the role of school buildings, sports facilities, and washrooms in creating a space where all students can feel equal and respected. While classrooms, school boards, and computers are acknowledged as important for educational purposes, they are not considered as central to advancing gender equality and social inclusion (see Figure 2). This suggests that, despite the focus on physical elements, there is a recognition that true inclusivity goes beyond just the material environment. Emotional and social factors, which are equally critical, need to be addressed to achieve comprehensive inclusion in schools.

Girls' Focus on Social and Emotional Support

In contrast, girls placed greater emphasis on the social and emotional dimensions of the school environment. The word cloud generated from their perspectives highlighted elements such as 'teachers,' 'equal treatment,' 'books and pens,' and 'counseling services' as central to fostering GESI (see Figure. 3). The emphasis on 'equal treatment' reflects the need for fairness in the learning

process, while the focus on 'books and pens' and 'counseling services' underscores the importance of creating a supportive and resourceful school atmosphere.

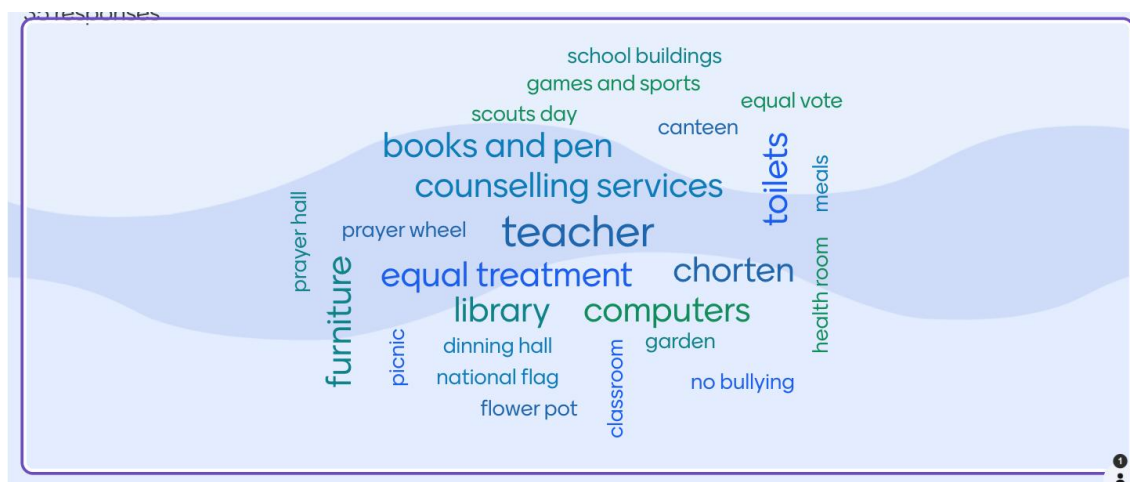


Figure 3. Word cloud of School Mapping through Girls' Arts

Girls' perspectives highlight a more comprehensive view of gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) that goes beyond physical infrastructure. Their focus on equity, mental health support, and equal access to educational resources demonstrates an understanding that true inclusivity involves meeting both material and emotional needs. This suggests that inclusive school environments require not only equitable facilities but also supportive and empathetic environments where students feel empowered to challenge gender stereotypes. By emphasizing the importance of social support and mental well-being, girls' perspectives reflect a recognition that deeper relational and emotional factors play a critical role in fostering a truly inclusive educational experience.

Gendered Perceptions of Inclusion

The study reveals distinct gendered perspectives on inclusion within schools, with boys and girls emphasizing different aspects of what makes an inclusive environment. Boys prioritize physical infrastructure, such as school buildings, playgrounds, and dining halls, believing these structural elements are the cornerstone of inclusion. For them, the tangible environment is critical in ensuring equal participation and comfort for all students. In contrast, girls focus more on relational and emotional aspects of inclusion, underscoring the importance of fairness, mental health support, and equal access to educational resources. This divergence in perceptions points to deeper gendered understandings of inclusion and equity.

The contrasting perceptions between boys and girls reflect the gendered ways in which inclusion is understood and valued. Boys emphasize the physical spaces that shape their daily school experience, believing that these elements, such as adequate playgrounds and functional dining halls, are crucial for fostering an inclusive environment. These views align with traditional gender expectations that value physical and structural aspects of educational settings. Girls, on the other hand, place greater importance on emotional and social support, advocating for fair treatment, mental health resources, and care.

The differences in how boys and girls perceive inclusion can be explained through the lens of gender socialization. From an early age, boys and girls are often socialized into different roles and behaviours, influencing their perspectives on what constitutes an inclusive environment. Boys may focus more on physical aspects of inclusion due to traditional notions of masculinity that emphasize space, structure, and physical activity. In contrast, girls, who are often encouraged to value emotional intelligence and social relationships, may place more emphasis on mental health support, fairness, and emotional care in the school setting.

Boys primarily see the physical environment as the key to fostering inclusion, with their focus on infrastructure highlighting a more limited and traditional view of gender equality. On the other hand, girls' emphasis on social and emotional support reveals a deeper, more nuanced understanding of inclusion that acknowledges the importance of fairness, care, and equality. This difference in perceptions suggests that while physical spaces are important, they are not enough to address the complex social dynamics contributing to inequality. True gender equality and social inclusion require a more comprehensive approach beyond infrastructure and addressing students' social and emotional needs.

Boys and girls perceive inclusion differently, influenced by their gendered socialization and experiences. Boys prioritize physical infrastructure, while girls emphasize relational and emotional aspects, such as fairness and support. These differing views highlight the need for a broader understanding of inclusion that incorporates physical and emotional dimensions. To achieve true gender equality and social inclusion in schools, moving beyond a narrow focus on physical spaces and addressing the deeper social, emotional, and relational factors that contribute to a genuinely inclusive environment is crucial.

The Role of Teachers in Promoting GESI

The research underscores the significant role of teachers in promoting Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) within schools. Regardless of the differing perspectives between boys and girls, both groups acknowledged

teachers' crucial role in shaping the school culture and ensuring the integration of GESI principles into everyday practices. Teachers are key in challenging gender biases, promoting equality, and fostering an inclusive environment. However, the findings also highlight a gap in the teachers' understanding of GESI, with many focusing primarily on physical infrastructure as the key to promoting inclusivity. This points to a need for enhanced teacher training that goes beyond tangible resources and addresses the deeper social, emotional, and policy-related aspects of GESI. Teachers are seen as essential in facilitating change. However, their current approach may be limited in scope, emphasizing the need for professional development in broader aspects of gender and social inclusion.

The research findings suggest that while teachers are universally recognized as central to fostering inclusion, their understanding of GESI tends to be more limited than expected. As role models and leaders, teachers are instrumental in shaping the daily practices that influence students' perceptions of gender equality. However, their focus primarily remains on the physical infrastructure, such as school facilities, rather than the more intricate social, emotional, and systemic factors that play a significant role in true inclusivity. Despite recognizing their pivotal role, there is an evident need for teacher training programs that expand their views of GESI, encouraging a more holistic approach that integrates visible and hidden elements of inclusion.

The limited understanding of GESI among teachers can be attributed to several factors, including the prevalent focus on visible and tangible aspects of inclusion in the educational system. Teachers are often trained with an emphasis on managing physical environments and addressing surface-level issues, such as infrastructure and classroom management, which can inadvertently lead them to overlook the deeper, systemic challenges related to gender and social inequalities. Additionally, socio-economic factors such as economic exploitation and mobility are often neglected in the curriculum despite their significant impact on marginalized groups, especially girls from lower-income backgrounds.

The recognition of teachers' importance in promoting GESI and their limited understanding of the broader implications of gender and social inclusion. While teachers are acknowledged as key players in creating inclusive environments, their focus on physical infrastructure reveals a more constrained view of what inclusion entails. GESI is a multifaceted concept that extends beyond the physical spaces students inhabit and includes issues like economic exploitation, social mobility, and hidden inequalities. The lack of emphasis on these factors within both the student and teacher perspectives indicates a need for a more comprehensive curriculum that addresses visible aspects of inclusion

and the underlying socio-economic and emotional challenges that contribute to inequality. Teachers' understanding of GESI needs to be expanded to encompass these deeper issues, which are often overlooked in traditional educational settings.

While teachers are recognized as central figures in promoting GESI, the study highlights a significant gap in their understanding of the full scope of gender and social inclusion. The emphasis on physical infrastructure in promoting GESI reflects a narrow view of inclusion that overlooks essential socio-economic and emotional factors. To address this gap, there is a pressing need for more comprehensive teacher training that includes the visible and hidden aspects of GESI. By broadening their understanding of the systemic issues surrounding gender inequality, teachers can become more effective agents of change in fostering a truly inclusive school environment that supports all students, regardless of gender or socio-economic background.

Discussion

Boys placed a strong emphasis on the importance of physical infrastructure, such as school buildings, playgrounds, and dining halls, as foundational to creating inclusive environments. This focus aligns with Connell's (2009) argument that material conditions play a pivotal role in reinforcing or challenging existing gender norms. By prioritizing tangible elements, boys perceive these spaces as crucial in ensuring equitable participation and comfort for all students. Shore et al. (2011) similarly emphasize that inclusive physical environments are vital for creating spaces where all students, regardless of gender, feel safe and valued. Acker (2006) supports this perspective by discussing how organizational structures, such as school facilities, can either perpetuate or alleviate inequalities, making these tangible resources instrumental in fostering inclusion.

Teachers' perspectives also reflect the significance of physical infrastructure. They viewed school buildings, sports facilities, and washrooms as essential for promoting inclusivity, seeing them as crucial for ensuring equal opportunities for all students. Classrooms, school boards, and computers, though recognized as important for learning, were not seen as central to advancing GESI. This finding aligns with the literature on physical spaces in schools, where tangible elements are often prioritized in discussions of inclusion (Connell, 2009; Acker, 2006). However, while physical infrastructure is important, both boys and teachers' perspectives suggest a limited view of GESI, as physical elements alone cannot address the deeper social and emotional factors essential for true inclusion.

Teachers' focus on the more tangible aspects of the school environment highlights the need for a broader approach to GESI. This aligns with UNESCO's (2020) call for a more comprehensive approach that integrates both physical and non-physical elements. Teachers' emphasis on physical infrastructure suggests the importance of professional development programs that broaden their understanding of GESI to encompass social, emotional, and policy-related dimensions. Given their crucial role in shaping school culture, teachers' training should address both the tangible and intangible aspects of inclusion (Shore et al., 2011; Ely & Thomas, 2001).

This perspective from girls aligns with Stromquist's (2007) findings that implicit biases in teaching methods and environment often reinforce harmful gender stereotypes. The girls' focus on fairness, mental health support, and equal access to educational resources points to a more nuanced understanding of GESI. The emphasis on social support resonates with UNCT Nepal's (2011) assertion that educational systems need to empower students to question and challenge societal norms that perpetuate inequality. These findings demonstrate that girls' perceptions of GESI go beyond infrastructure to include crucial relational and emotional components that contribute to an inclusive school environment.

The contrasting perspectives of boys and girls underscore the gendered nature of perceptions of inclusion within schools. Boys, likely influenced by societal expectations, prioritize structural aspects like school buildings and playgrounds, viewing them as the foundation for inclusion. Girls, on the other hand, emphasize relational and emotional aspects, focusing on equality, care, and support. These differences reflect broader gendered perceptions of inclusion and are consistent with the discussions by Kabeer (2005) and Acker (2006), who argue that gendered practices within organizational settings shape individuals' understandings of equity and inclusion.

The differences between boys and girls suggest that they experience and understand inclusion through distinct lenses, shaped by their interactions with societal and institutional norms. However, while boys' focus on physical spaces underscores their importance, it also highlights a narrow understanding of GESI. Scholars like Kabeer (2005) and UNESCO (2020) point out that achieving true gender equality requires addressing deeper systemic issues, including social hierarchies, entrenched power imbalances, and harmful gender norms. Infrastructure alone, while necessary, cannot resolve the broader socio-economic and cultural barriers that perpetuate inequality. The boys' limited focus suggests a need for interventions that deepen their understanding of these underlying factors and their impact on fostering a genuinely inclusive school environment.

Despite the differences in focus between boys and girls, one common theme emerged from the findings: the pivotal role of teachers in promoting GESI

within schools. Teachers were universally recognized as central figures in shaping school culture and ensuring the integration of GESI principles into daily practices. This view aligns with Shore et al. (2011) and Ely and Thomas (2001), who emphasize the importance of inclusive leadership in enhancing organizational outcomes such as student engagement and performance. Teachers, as facilitators and role models, hold significant responsibility for challenging gender biases and promoting equality both in the classroom and throughout the broader school community. However, while teachers are seen as key agents for promoting inclusion by both boys and girls, their own perspectives suggest a more limited understanding of GESI, primarily focusing on physical infrastructure. This highlights the need for teacher training that expands their understanding of GESI beyond tangible resources to include the social, emotional, and policy-related factors that contribute to a truly inclusive school environment. UNESCO (2020) stresses the importance of professional development that incorporates both visible and hidden aspects of GESI.

The research highlighted a significant gap in both students' and teachers' understanding of critical aspects of Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI), particularly economic exploitation and mobility. These issues were not emphasized in the word clouds generated from students' or teachers' responses, suggesting that they are not widely recognized as integral elements of GESI. This lack of attention points to a gap in the curriculum, where socio-economic barriers are often overlooked in favor of more visible or surface-level indicators of inclusion. Unterhalter (2005) stresses the importance of addressing hidden inequalities within educational systems, such as economic exploitation, which disproportionately affect marginalized groups, especially girls in low-income regions. UNESCO (2015) identifies these socio-economic challenges as significant obstacles to achieving gender equality in education, further highlighting the importance of integrating these issues into the curriculum to ensure a more comprehensive understanding of GESI.

The research highlights that boys and teachers emphasize physical infrastructure, while girls focus on social and emotional aspects of GESI, such as equal treatment and resource access. These differing perspectives point to the need for a balanced approach to fostering inclusive school environments that integrate both physical and non-physical elements. The key role of teachers in promoting GESI underscores the need for targeted professional development to address both tangible and intangible barriers. By addressing these gaps, schools can foster a more holistic understanding of GESI, ensuring all students have equal opportunities to thrive.

CONCLUSION

The findings reveal distinct gendered perspectives on Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) within schools. Boys and teachers focus on physical infrastructure, such as school buildings and sports facilities, viewing these elements as essential for inclusion. In contrast, girls emphasize relational and emotional aspects, such as fairness, mental health support, and access to educational resources, highlighting the importance of a nurturing environment. Teachers, while recognizing the value of physical resources, often prioritize them over broader social, emotional, and policy-related factors, indicating a narrow understanding of inclusion. The study also points to a critical gap in addressing deeper socio-cultural issues, such as economic exploitation and implicit biases, which are crucial for achieving true gender equity.

Recommendations

Equitable Access to Physical Resources

Schools must prioritize fair and inclusive access to essential physical facilities such as playgrounds, washrooms, sports areas, and libraries. Ensuring that all students, regardless of gender, can equally utilize these spaces is crucial for fostering a sense of belonging and inclusion. Gender-sensitive designs and policies should be implemented to address barriers that might limit access, creating a more equitable and supportive environment for all.

Support for Social and Emotional Well-Being

Strengthening mental health support through accessible counseling services is essential to address students' social and emotional needs. Schools should also foster peer support networks and mentorship programs to create a nurturing environment that encourages equity and inclusion.

Comprehensive Teacher Training

Professional development programs should be designed to equip teachers with the knowledge and skills necessary to address both the physical and non-physical aspects of (GESI). These programs must include training on recognizing and addressing implicit biases, understanding power dynamics, and mitigating systemic inequalities within classrooms and school practices. By fostering greater awareness and competence, teachers can play a pivotal role in creating more inclusive and equitable learning environment.

Student Engagement Programs

Schools should actively involve students in workshops and collaborative projects focused on promoting GESI. These activities can encourage dialogue on gender norms, inclusivity, and shared responsibilities in creating a supportive school environment.

Limitations

The study's scope is limited to the perceptions of a small group of students and teachers from Samtse Dzongkhag and may not reflect the broader perspectives of teachers nationwide that may have distinct cultural, social, and economic contexts. Furthermore, the participants' mapping of the school resources might have been shaped by personal biases and immediate priorities, potentially overlooking a more comprehensive understanding of systemic issues.

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