

# How Bhutanese Schools Nurture Political Engagement

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This article highlights the democratic culture within schools and its potential impact on the national politics of Bhutan. It highlights how the absence of leadership development, gender biases in student leadership, gender stereotyping, limited civic education, and passive roles of student leaders in schools may significantly influence the course of a nation's politics. It argues that fostering democratic values and practices within educational institutions, such as schools and higher institutions, is crucial for shaping future political landscapes and enhancing democratic governance.

## Connecting the School Experience to National Politics

Democratic governance is a cornerstone of modern societies and the values, principles, and practices of democracy instilled within schools play a pivotal role in shaping the political landscape of a nation.<sup>1</sup> Bhutanese schools have instituted a system of engaging students in various leadership roles such as captains (alternatively, they use designations like prefects, leaders, and representatives). The selection of these students involves a nomination and election process to strengthen the connection between students and the school administration. In many schools in Bhutan, it is customary for teachers and school administrators to establish a requirement for students to possess strong academic records as a condition for participating in student council elections. This practice illustrates how educators frequently use academic achievement as a measure of a student's potential for effective leadership. There is also a discernible inclination towards choosing student leaders who are more inclined to comply with the guidance and expectations set by teachers and school authorities. It becomes crucial to examine whether these practices of giving preference to specific groups, such as students with high grades, can be seen as actively promoting democratic principles within the school environment. Despite the school policies of how school leadership is implemented, it is important to acknowledge that the development of leadership skills among students cultivates a student-centred atmosphere of governance.

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1 Dewey, 1997, Democracy and education: An introduction to the philosophy of education

Depending on their age and academic level, students are entrusted with various logistical and administrative responsibilities. This concept draws parallels with the realm of national politics, where a select few citizens are elected to represent the interests of the people, ensuring the nation's peace, prosperity, security, and development. These elected officials bear significant power and responsibilities at the national level.

### **Children Learn from the Actions of their Teachers**

In many Bhutanese schools, the morning assembly is important, serving as a platform for conveying school updates and imparting knowledge and values related to being a responsible individual, hygiene, leadership, and success, among other topics. I have observed that male teachers often take centre stage with their oratory skills which captivate many students. Eloquence becomes a focal point for individuals when evaluating aspiring politicians on national television or in forums, even though leadership extends beyond oratory abilities. It is crucial to consider how teachers' roles and behaviour in schools influence students' attitudes and aspirations.

It is common for student leaders in schools to find themselves primarily fulfilling the role of information conveyors rather than active participants in decision-making. The decisions are mostly made by teachers and school administrators. The student leaders are frequently assigned the responsibility of relaying messages from the school administration to the student body, with limited influence on the actual decision-making procedures. When it comes to matters like selecting a school picnic destination or formulating child-friendly policies within the school, student leaders typically have no input.

Perennial educators may contend that a child's foremost duty lies in acquiring mathematical proficiency and grasping fundamental knowledge. Yet the pressing question arises: Where lies the opportunity for young individuals to cultivate leadership skills, assume responsibility for their choices, and receive guidance on their journey toward becoming responsible adults? This underscores the need for schools to develop more robust leadership programmes.

Children receive their civic education from textbooks that cover topics such as governance, politics, and local government, but they rarely have

the opportunity to gain practical experience in these areas. While the classroom environment provides shelter from adverse weather conditions, it should not confine students to learning exclusively within school walls.

School assignments and activities typically revolve around the immediate school environment, leaving children with limited exposure to the real issues facing their communities. This lack of real-world experience hinders their development of critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and leadership abilities when it comes to addressing community problems. This approach can give rise to a passive and hierarchical governance system within the school where authority remains concentrated among teachers and school administrators, mirroring the centralised power structures often observed in national politics.

### **Limited Democracy Education in Schools**

Democracy extends beyond the mere act of participating in elections. Within many schools, the concept of democratic education tends to be narrowly focused on conducting student council elections, often overlooking broader democratic values and practices like accountability, representation of ideas, and providing feedback and critical input to the processes and mechanisms of the school.

Student leaders vying for positions in school leadership frequently make promises related to improving restroom facilities, installing advanced teaching tools, and in some instances, even advocating for longer hair for male students. While schools may celebrate election day with enthusiasm, it is essential to scrutinise the extent to which student leaders are truly aware of their core responsibilities and whether they employ strategies to attract voters without adequately addressing the underlying issues.

I have witnessed first-hand how factors like caste, region, and beliefs can significantly impact the outcome of elections, even in schools. When I ran for a student leadership position in high school in Paro, I faced a challenging situation where my opponent hailed from the local community while I was viewed as an outsider. In the eyes of the student body, the person representing the community embodied their language, culture, and beliefs.

This experience had the potential to shape young minds into perceiving politics as a game influenced by regional, belief, and caste considerations. Such a perspective of leadership positions may encourage individuals to seek support through their friends and community connections, ultimately deepening the divisions within our shared space, in this case, our nation.

It is crucial to recognise that, aside from the election procedures themselves, the education on democracy within schools remains quite deficient. This limited comprehension of democracy can produce citizens who perceive politics exclusively as an election, overlooking the significance of active engagement, accountability, and participation in decision-making processes.

### **Gender in Education Institutions: Stereotyping, Misplaced Compassion, and Leadership**

Gender has evolved into a pivotal component of politics, emphasising the critical need to explore how educational institutions enable children of all genders through inclusive school policies and programmes. These efforts aim to prepare them for the challenges and opportunities that extend into the realm of politics. While numerous civil society organisations and international non-governmental organisations are dedicated to enhancing women's involvement in politics, both at the local and national levels, there is a visible emphasis on capacity-building programmes and empowerment workshops for women. Nevertheless, it remains equally important to examine the role of educational institutions in fostering social justice for women in the political arena.

In numerous educational institutions, male students are favoured for leadership roles while female students are frequently overlooked or assigned gender-stereotypical positions. In many Bhutanese schools, male leaders are either the favoured individuals to lead the school morning prayers or are chosen as flag bearers in various parades. Conversely, female student leaders and their followers are often called upon to assist in gender-stereotype tasks like chopping onions for the school rimdro (prayers for general wellbeing).

Such biases based on gender can perpetuate inequalities and reinforce the notion that certain roles within national politics are inherently associated with a particular gender. This can impede progress towards achieving a

gender-balanced representation in politics. Gender stereotyping within schools can have enduring effects on a nation's political landscape. Encouraging girls to assume passive roles and boys to be assertive may influence their participation and aspirations within the political sphere

An illustrative example of gender inequality can be seen in the statements made by a young student at Taktse College of Language and Cultural Studies during a participatory planning workshop conducted by the BCMD on the topic of leadership in educational institutions. This student pointed out that, regardless of the number of votes a female candidate secures, she would never become the chief councillor, the highest position attainable for a student at the college. According to the student, the reasoning behind this is that women may not be able to fulfil certain responsibilities, such as night patrolling within the college.

This situation prompts reflection on whether this is indicative of misplaced compassion, a failure to grasp the principles of democracy, a manifestation of a patriarchal system within the college, or reasons yet unknown. This example serves as a reflection on the status of women in national politics as well. For instance, out of the 20 seats in the National Council, only one woman was elected, highlighting the limited participation of women in the political landscape. Gender stereotyping can discourage girls from pursuing leadership roles in politics, resulting in a lack of representation of women in national political bodies.

On the other hand, it is also important to consider the roles of teachers according to their gender in educational institutions. To underscore this point, male teachers in remote schools are frequently seen engaging in sports activities whereas it is not the same for female teachers. While definitive reasons remain elusive and warrant additional research, it is postulated that the constraints may stem from inadequate resources and initiatives directed toward female teachers and female students.

Drawing from my personal experiences, I have observed that when female teachers possess influential personalities and exhibit strong leadership qualities, it tends to inspire greater proactive engagement among female students. Moreover, the practice of female teachers overseeing the home science club, which often revolves around cooking classes, exemplifies how gender stereotypes are perpetuated in schools. Should girls aspire

exclusively to become culinary experts or be encouraged to pursue political careers?

Efforts should be made to eliminate gender biases in leadership positions in schools and involve students in decision-making processes. Teachers should adopt a positive modelling approach to eradicate the reinforcement of gender stereotypes. It is crucial that the curriculum, teaching methods, and educators actively promote democracy, including the development of leadership skills within schools.

### **Conclusion: Where Can Aspiring Politicians Develop Their Skills?**

Assuming that leadership skills are integral to political leaders, this article argues for the necessity of robust leadership development programmes in schools. Cultivating leadership skills among citizens is a fundamental aspect of a thriving democracy. While programmes such as scouting have initiated various activities to enhance the skills of potential scout leaders the emphasis placed on learning, like Dzongkha and English languages, Buddhism, Philosophy, Driglam Namzha (traditional etiquette), and Mathematics significantly outweighs that given to leadership development in Bhutanese schools. The consequences of inadequate leadership training and skill development programmes may limit the emergence of future political leaders equipped with the necessary skills and commitment to promote democratic values at the national level.

Schools should actively encourage both diversity in representation and the exchange of ideas. While a school comprising children from a single community may foster close-knit relationships, there is a risk of inadvertently nurturing regionalism or tribal divisions. To promote diversity within a democratic context, students need to interact with peers from different backgrounds.

Introducing inter-school festivals and organising alternative education camps like Camp Rural Urban Friendship can play a crucial role in bringing together children from diverse castes, religions, and cultures across the nation. The current school system often leads students toward tribal rivalries rather than fostering collaboration to address communal issues.

Some instances offer valuable insights into how children and young individuals can be empowered within educational settings. An excellent illustration is the FINA (Forum for International and National Awareness) student body at Sherubtse which exemplifies the delegation of authority and the cultivation of leadership skills across different tiers of an educational institution. Student leaders are actively involved in formulating plans and initiatives for the college and they also play a pivotal role in their implementation.

Drawing from these instances, it is advisable to provide students with opportunities to engage in decision-making and assume responsibilities. Schools should contemplate the possibility of decentralising some of their authority to student leadership bodies, keeping in mind the age and educational level of the students involved.

While not every teacher is a democracy or a governance expert, it is important to note that Bhutan has 205 gewogs, each with its local government administration, comprising the gup, mangmi, tshogpa, and the gewog administration officer. To foster a deeper understanding of civic engagement, children and young people should be given more opportunities to engage in learning experiences beyond the confines of their school premises.

Instead of limiting Socially Useful Productive Work (SUPW) to tasks like cleaning school drains and disposing of paper, young individuals should be encouraged to engage in activities such as mapping their communities, identifying local issues, proposing solutions, and collaborating with local government authorities. This approach can provide a level of civic education that goes beyond what textbooks can offer. Alongside the goal of creating a STEM-educated society, Bhutanese education should also measure the extent to which our young people are actively involved at the grassroots level.

Gender should be a significant topic of conversation within educational institutions. Female educators should actively engage in setting positive examples for their students. School administrations should also explore the possibility of introducing a broader range of leisure activities for both female teachers and female students. It is important to avoid limiting girls to traditional roles such as cooking, nursing, or specific sports like handball,

just as boys should not be restricted to exclusively masculine activities. Policies and practices that perpetuate sexism and structural marginalisation should undergo a thorough review.

Democratic culture cultivated in schools has the potential to mirror and influence national politics. To create a democratic society with vibrant and inclusive politics, it is imperative that schools prioritise leadership development, promote democratic values and practices, promote gender equity, broaden the scope of democratic and civic education, and empower student leaders to play active decision-making roles. By doing so, schools can contribute to the development of responsible, engaged, and politically active citizens who will shape the future of democratic governance.

## **References**

Dewey, John. *Democracy and education: An introduction to the philosophy of education*. New York: Macmillan, 1930.