

# CONNECTIONS

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## Kettering's Multinational Research



The Kettering Foundation is a nonprofit, operating foundation rooted in the American tradition of cooperative research. Kettering's primary research question is, what makes democracy work as it should? Kettering's research is distinctive because it is conducted from the perspective of citizens and focuses on what people can do collectively to address problems affecting their lives, their communities, and their nation. The foundation seeks to identify and address the challenges to making democracy work as it should through inter-related program areas that focus on citizens, communities, and institutions. The foundation collaborates with an extensive network of community groups, professional associations, researchers, scholars, and citizens around the world. Established in 1927 by inventor Charles F. Kettering, the foundation is a 501(c)(3) organization that does not make grants but engages in joint research with others. For more information about KF research and publications, see the Kettering Foundation's website at [www.kettering.org](http://www.kettering.org).

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# Deliberation: Touching Lives across National Boundaries

By Maura Casey

In March, people from around the world gathered at the Kettering Foundation to explore the approaches that groups from Tajikistan, Germany, India, Brazil, Russia, and the United States are taking to civic education and learning—approaches that range from rap music to deliberative forums. The Multinational Symposium is an annual series of meetings organized by Kettering. Each year, the symposium has a different focus. In 2016, the symposium explored, how do young people learn to engage in the practices of citizenship in a democracy? What can be learned from experiments in using deliberative practices in the civic education of young people?

The approaches are all different. Germany is using music and meet-

ings with public officials to engage youth; in Russia, libraries are the neutral ground for young people to flock to forums; in Brazil, the Steve Biko Institute helps people raise their voices and take pride in their racial backgrounds. But the goals are the same: to develop young people into citizens.

Citizens all have at least one thing in common: no matter what nation they come from, sooner or later they gather to ask one another, “What should we do?” The Kettering Foundation has long researched what comes after that question: how people overcome differences to deliberate together and make good decisions.

Inevitably, some times are more turbulent and challenging than others. That’s the situation those from Brazil say they face.

Widespread protests over economic and political upheaval pose a special challenge to teachers in Brazil. “Democracy seems shaken due to recent events,” said Telma Gimenez, who also stated that even wearing certain colors of clothing can be interpreted as a political act, revealing allegiances for or against the government. “People are fighting. The question is, how can schools go against the current atmosphere to reach students? We help teachers take advantage of the educational moment.”



leadership training there. “Brazil is seen as a model of racial democracy, but when you see the material conditions of these people, we don’t have equality,” she said.

Stefanie Olbrys, a social studies teacher in the Windsor Central School District outside of Binghamton, New York, said that when she was a student, she did not view her voice as an instrument for change. Now that she is an educator, she is determined to give her students a different experience. “Every day, I began to say to my students, ‘What

For Gimenez, that means convening deliberative forums using issue guides on topics like bullying not only to explore the nuances of the issue, but also to allow students to relate their own personal experiences. “We use [the forums and guides] to show the complexities and get away from the confrontational aspects of an issue.”

“Brazil became a democracy in the mid-1980s after a dictatorship lasting decades,” said Andreia Lisboa De Sousa, who works with youth at the Steve Biko Institute. “We forget that; the political culture is not very new.” The Biko Institute has worked for 22 years to teach the skills needed for citizenship to black and native students. Approximately 6,000 students have attended the Citizenship and Black Consciousness course at the institute. Others have undergone





do you think?” In her classes, the students began to deliberate every day and became so engaged in learning that their marks improved and they began to hand in assignments more consistently. Other teachers and administrators also noticed the changes. Now, many more teachers in her school district are using deliberation in their classrooms. “Our state education department sees this as valuable and wants teachers to do this all over the state,” Olbrys said. “It will help students become life-long learners.” One state

education department official visited her classroom and asked one of her students, “What are you learning?” The student replied, “I’m learning how to be a leader.”

But students aren’t the only ones who benefit from deliberation, said Lisa Strahley, an associate professor at SUNY Broome Community College, located in the same Upstate New York county as the Windsor Central School District. “Teachers don’t give themselves a voice, either. In helping students find their voices, teachers find their own voices,” she said.

“I agree with the role of teachers,” said Shamsiddin Karimov, the director of the Tajikistan National NGO Association. “But [in Tajikistan] teachers are among the poorest and most vulnerable populations,” he said. Tajikistan is facing challenges of terrorism, high unemployment, and radical Islam, he said. Civic education is more often used to promote government ideology. As an alternative, Karimov’s organization has a goal of expanding public, deliberative forums to promote democracy in central Asia. Rather than connect with the education system, he and his colleagues reach out to traditional public institutions, such as mosques, the *mahalla* (neighborhood), and the *jamoat* (community), as well as the respected elders involved in each.

Giving low-income students hands-on experience in democracy

was particularly important to Juergen Brecht, a social worker in Mannheim, Germany. “We wanted to start a youth parliament, but did not want to reach only the students from the middle class or upper middle class,” he said. He and his colleagues wanted to give a parliamentary experience to young people who were “refugees or people on the outside of society.” They created groups with a mix of students from various ethnicities as well as income and educational levels. These groups were asked to discuss the problems of their neighborhoods and communities. The project has grown to encompass 16 different districts. Brecht also facilitates meetings between students and politicians, who agree to bring the student concerns to local councils and try to address the problems youth face.

Another project in Mannheim harnesses the power of rap and hip-hop music to connect local low-income students with civil society and students in Bogota, Colombia, said Rainer Kern, the meeting’s representative of the lord mayor of Mannheim. “The students [in Colombia and Germany] create music together, sending sound files back and forth.” The project, which has involved 500 young people so far, uses the music to help students, including refugees, articulate their concerns. “You can have this in cities,



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in camps, in universities—you can connect all these groups and also reach the international community,” Kern said.

“It helps those involved understand that they are citizens—not just of Germany, or of a specific city, but they are European citizens,” observed Antonella Valmorbida, the secretary general of the Association of Local Democracy Agencies based in Belgium.

To promote gender diversity, India passed laws in the 1990s that reserve one-third of local elective offices for female candidates. However, half of the world’s illiterate population

resides in South Asia, and women are more frequently illiterate than men because they have had fewer opportunities for education, said Benish Aslam, a lecturer at Jamia Hamdard University in New Delhi. Because so many women were elected to office for the first time, human rights education and women's empowerment programs were initiated, using videos in many languages to educate them.

The need for encouraging participatory democracy in a diverse nation led to the "Two Cs, one D," approach, said George Mathew, chair of the Institute of Social Sciences in India. "Cricket, because the best players are from Pakistan and India; cinema, because the best actresses and actors are from the Muslim communities,

and democracy, because without a democratic discussion it is impossible to make progress." More women are getting elected to village councils, and many from the village councils will be elected to parliament, continued Mathew.

"Women have come out of their shells. They realize if they don't deal with certain issues, nobody will. Women in some states are making sure that women are represented in a major way. It is a transformational change," he said.

Transformation is a challenge in Russia, said Denis Makarov, the executive director of the Foundation for Development of Civic Culture. "Ten years ago, things were easier, but libraries are still open spaces. Everyone has enthusiasm about what libraries do. Without them, things wouldn't happen as much."

According to Makarov, libraries thrive as places where deliberation can take place even when there are other restrictions. Forums held in libraries attract young people eager to discuss issues of the day.

"We think youth participation in forums is important," said Natalia Polekhina, who teaches the English language at Bryansk Secondary School No. 18. "Young people are excited about the forums. There are issues that unite generations, and one of our objectives is to help young



**All this work with youth occurs against a challenging backdrop. Divisions between people seem to be growing around the world; this challenge was not lost on Multinational Symposium participants.**



people discover something that affects their daily lives.”

All this work with youth occurs against a challenging backdrop. Divisions between people seem to be growing around the world; this challenge was not lost on Multinational Symposium participants. “I don’t think anyone in this room here needs to be convinced that deliberation and tolerance and citizenship can be taught and that they work,” pointed out Benjamin Barber. Barber, founder and president of the Global Parliament of Mayors Project, continued, “Our question is, how can we impact a world that is going the other way?”

Jill McMillan, professor emerita at Wake Forest University, spoke about her many years of experience with introducing students to deliberation as a way of discussing public issues

in an empathetic way. “Despite our despair that polarization is so strong, I still contend that the most effective antidote is to influence one individual at a time. Human beings want to be heard. But careful, respectful listening—especially of those that take us on, isn’t easy,” she said. “Deliberation is the long view; it is not a quick fix. We need to talk across race, class, cultures, in our families and through art. If the goal is to internalize citizenship, the more often and longer we deliberate, the better,” she said. ■

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*A report by Scott London on the 2016 Multinational Symposium is available by contacting Kettering program officer Brad Rourke at [brouke@kettering.org](mailto:brouke@kettering.org).*