

# CONNECTIONS

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**On the Formation of Citizens**

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**Breaking the Mold: Journalism Reimagined**

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**INNOVATING FOR DEMOCRACY**

The Kettering Foundation is a nonprofit, operating foundation rooted in the American tradition of cooperative research. Kettering's primary research question is, what does it take to make 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 interrelated 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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# Deliberative Pedagogy in Elementary Schools

By Mindy LaBreck and Stacie Molnar-Main

*Kettering recognizes that schools can provide a space for adults and young people to learn about their roles as citizens in a democracy and the practice of deliberative politics. For many years, Kettering's civic education research has focused on*

*classroom teachers as one of the keys to educating young people about their roles in a democracy and the practice of deliberative politics. Recent efforts have focused specifically on how deliberation and other democratic practices can be reinforced in elementary schools.*

Several years ago, the Kettering Foundation published a book, *Deliberation in the Classroom: Fostering Critical Thinking, Community, and Citizenship in Schools*, describing learning from a series of research meetings with secondary school teachers. After publishing the book, the civic education group at Kettering convened a similar series of meetings with elementary teachers with an interest





**After about a year of experimenting with learning and teaching in a deliberative way, teachers were able to observe and identify a consistent set of skills and dispositions that enabled students to deliberate.**

in answering three questions:

1. Can elementary students learn to deliberate?
2. Are there common skills that can be reinforced, or learning experiences that can be provided, to prepare students to engage in deliberative decision-making?
3. Can these skills lead to a broader understanding of democratic politics?

The group met together several times to learn about deliberation and to discuss how they prepare their students for democracy, with the aim of reporting on their experiments using deliberative pedagogy in the

classroom. This type of pedagogy merges dialogic, engaged pedagogies with democratic classroom practices aimed at building communication skills, participatory skills, and critical thinking skills that can support deliberative democracy, according to editors Timothy Shaffer, Nicholas Longo, Idit Manosevitch, and Maxine Thomas in *Deliberative Pedagogy: Teaching and Learning for Democratic Engagement*.

#### **ELEMENTARY STUDENTS CAN LEARN TO DELIBERATE**

Through these exchanges with elementary teachers, we learned that kids ranging from 5-to-11-years-old can learn to deliberate, but it's not something that comes naturally. It is highly dependent upon the students' level of maturity and communication skills. These characteristics, along with their lived experiences, impact their language development, interpersonal habits, and ability to engage in the types of abstract reasoning that deliberation demands.

The fact that students were not prepared to deliberate when they entered the teachers' classrooms did not dissuade teachers. Teachers embraced the challenge and used complimentary programs, like Cosmo-Kidz and National Issues Forums in the Classroom, to support and inform their deliberative pedagogy.

## COMMON SKILLS AND EXPERIENCES THAT SUPPORT DELIBERATION

After about a year of experimenting with learning and teaching in a deliberative way, teachers were able to observe and identify a consistent set of skills and dispositions that enabled students to deliberate. These skills and dispositions were named the Building Blocks of K-5 Deliberative Learning. Here is brief description of each and how they were reinforced in elementary classrooms.

*Communication skills* are the ways in which students express and comprehend ideas to meet their own needs and collaborate. In the earliest grades, teachers supported the development of communication skills by teaching basic verbal and nonverbal skills and by using cues to encourage students to apply those skills in class. Some teachers emphasized the senses used in communication by using cues to help students to attend to the ways that they can, for example, “listen with their eyes, ears, head, heart.” Beginning in about third grade, teachers introduced the skills of active listening and paraphrasing. In the upper elementary grades, sentence stems (a sentence with missing parts that students can fill in with their own ideas) were used to model ways that students can draw connections between others’ ideas, express

disagreement during class discussions or deliberations, and introduce new ideas.

*Empathic perspective-taking* is an awareness of feelings in oneself, the ability to recognize and imagine others’ feelings and experiences, and the skills involved in responding compassionately to others. In the early elementary grades, the teachers encouraged empathy by introducing “feelings vocabulary words” to students and by encouraging them to use words and drawings to represent their own feelings. Eventually, they would ask students to predict how they might feel if faced with common experiences—like losing a toy, waiting for an upcoming birthday, or receiving a compliment. Over time,



students became skilled at predicting how other people might feel in similar situations.

Interactive read-aloud strategies (where the teacher reads a story aloud and pauses to ask questions about the text) were used to engage students in imagining how book characters might feel. In the upper elementary grades, teachers extended lessons on “point of view” to reinforce how perspective can be influenced by peoples’ life experiences. Students read primary source accounts, conducted interviews, and analyzed how characters’ experiences influenced their values, feelings, and decisions. Teachers introduced the concept of “voices not in the room” to reinforce the importance of seeking the perspectives of people who may not be present in the classroom.

*Sense of belonging to a democratic community* refers to students’ belief that they are contributing members of a classroom centered on democratic values. Educators noted the importance of establishing a classroom community where all students are valued, including those who are perceived as “different” in some way, those who offer dissenting perspectives, and those who do not always adhere to classroom norms. An Arizona elementary teacher explained, “As a teacher, you are an incredibly important model for

your students because you create the conditions” where students learn that including every voice in the classroom matters.

The teacher went on to describe how difficult it can be to respond with inclusivity and care when a student does not conform to classroom norms. Yet, all the teachers agreed that when they demonstrate interest in and care for nonconforming students, they model for other students that each voice in a democracy should be valued, including the voice of those who may be challenging accepted norms or authority.

The teachers also designed classroom activities that helped students build constructive relationships with one another and involved students in creating and reflecting on classroom rules and routines. They used games and other fun activities to promote participation and social connections, and regular classrooms meetings were used as forums for engaging students in reflection, planning, and problem-solving about classroom issues. While these types of activities are common in elementary classrooms, the teachers noted the significance of consistently approaching community building and group problem-solving with the goal of teaching democracy in mind.

*Sense of agency* is the internalized belief that one can control one’s

## BUILDING BLOCKS OF K-5 DELIBERATIVE LEARNING

### Communication skills



- Wait time/emotional regulation
- Active listening and paraphrasing skills
- Skills for speaking in a group
- Multiple ways of expressing agreement and disagreement
- Writing to support deliberation
- Deliberative questioning

### Empathetic perspective-taking



- Awareness of self, surroundings, and others
- Open-mindedness
- Ability to “listen with the heart”
- Respect for others, including privacy and boundaries
- Sense of awareness and interconnectedness among community members
- Perspective-taking skills
- “Voices not in the room”

### Sense of belonging to a democratic classroom community



- Willingness to participate
- Sense of belonging or of having a personal stake in the class community
- Ability to work with classmates on issues, even when there is significant disagreement
- Understanding the goals of democratic decision-making
- Awareness of the role of power, communities, and relationship structure in creating and recreating the social world

### Sense of agency



- Awareness that our stories are incomplete and “we are writing our future”
- Perseverance
- Self-confidence
- Growth mindset
- Belief that “I can be an agent of change”
- Awareness of our role in creating and recreating the social world

### Skills of deliberative decision-making



- Storytelling and story-hearing
- Ability to generate several solutions to a problem
- Ability to identify pros, cons, and trade-offs
- Naming and framing skills
- Critical thinking skills
- Comfort with ambiguity and conflict
- Ability to present the best case argument for perspectives with which you may disagree

actions and influence the world around them. Sense of agency is reflected in students' willingness to try new tasks or take risks in learning, in students' persistence in their work, and in their willingness to speak up when they have a concern or when something doesn't seem right.

Elementary teachers reinforced students' sense of agency by providing them meaningful classroom jobs and regular opportunities to have a voice in classroom decisions. Aware of how adults' comments can shape a student's sense of agency, teachers favored feedback focused on skill development, effort, or progress over feedback focused on whether students achieved the "correct" answer. The teachers attempted to encourage students to take risks in learning by reminding them that "mistakes are opportunities to learn," by celebrating creative ideas or unique ways of approaching problems, and by probing students' thinking during class discussions.

*Deliberative decision-making skills* are the specific cognitive and interpersonal skills that are used during deliberation. At any grade level, teaching deliberation requires that students engage with real-life issues and explore solutions to problems together. In early elementary

classrooms, simplified deliberations occurred that focused on issues that impacted the class, school, or playground. Teachers set the stage for deliberation by regularly asking open-ended questions about the school issues and inviting students to share their ideas. Teachers asked questions such as:

- What type of classroom do we want to have?
- What should we do when a new student joins the class?
- What choices do we have when you see that someone is being left out of a game?

While the youngest elementary students were not capable of engaging in the types of analyses that older students could, they were able to name problems in ways that reflected different ways of experiencing, seeing, or feeling a problem; they could brainstorm different ways to help or fix problems; and they could talk about the pluses (pros) and minuses (cons) of different actions. When teachers required students to identify more than two ways of naming problems and celebrated students' creative ideas, they were reinforcing students' deliberative capacities and conveying their confidence that each student could contribute to group problem-solving.

In the upper elementary grades,

teachers were able to introduce foundational concepts of deliberative democracy. Students could understand the concept of trade-offs as early as third grade, and they began to understand the concept of common ground by the end of elementary school. Citizen questions and public work were introduced in the upper elementary grades to help students differentiate between problems that are personal in nature and question or issues that require community or public action. “Citizen questions tend to be authentic and posed by students, problem-based or need-based, linked to community, and action-focused,” explained a fifth-grade teacher from State College, Pennsylvania. This concept can be used to help students bridge classroom learning with issues of concerns that exist in their lives or the community.

### **DELIBERATIVE POLITICS IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS**

Teaching the Building Blocks of K-5 Deliberative Learning can prepare young children to use the skills of deliberation to solve age-appropriate problems. One teacher shared how her students’ sense of agency and the skills of deliberative problem-solving prepared them to work together to solve a recess problem creatively. Talking together, listening to one



another, and weighing trade-offs gave them a way to come up with a unique solution (implementing “old school games” at recess) to an age-old problem (students were bored and not getting along at recess). Another teacher described how her class exercised their communication skills and applied the concept of common ground when trying to select a class science fair project that everyone could support. While these are not ground-breaking examples of democracy transformed, they demonstrate the relevance of deliberative politics to young people and offer evidence that young people can benefit from deliberative pedagogy.



**Creating a more democratic learning community in schools can contribute to the development of lifelong democratic capacities and citizens with a sense of agency.**

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#### LOOKING FORWARD

Deliberative democracy affirms the importance of citizens and their representatives justifying their decisions to each other in a public process as “free and equal persons seeking fair terms of cooperation,” rather than as simply subjects to be controlled, according to Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson in their book *Why Deliberative Democracy?* Critics have noted that deliberation’s reliance on rationality, quality facilitation, and certain types of communicative processes can reinforce power imbalances, obscure contested meanings, exaggerate consensus, or disadvantage populations who may favor other forms of engagement. These concerns are relevant to civic education and should inform educators’ work.

Despite those critiques, creating a more democratic learning community in schools can contribute to the development of lifelong democratic capacities and citizens with a sense of agency. The skills and capacities teachers identified as building blocks of citizenship and democratic life are not only relevant to young children, but to people of all ages. The ability to listen to one another, to consider perspectives and values different from our own, instilling a sense of belonging in community with other citizens, and having a sense of responsibility to solve problems together for the public good—these are all things to aspire to at any age. Deliberative pedagogy and the use of democratic practices like deliberation can open paths for kids and adults alike to see they are a part of a larger citizenry, a way to see themselves as public actors who can make a difference in their own communities. And, we know that schools are key to achieving this. ■

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