

DELIBERATIVE FORUMS / MINI CITIZENS' ASSEMBLIES

ORIGIN AND BACKGROUND

Deliberative forums originate from the political theory of deliberative democracy, shaped among others by Jürgen Habermas and John Rawls. The core idea: democracy lives not only through elections but also through dialogue and argumentation.

Over the past decades, citizens' assemblies and deliberative mini-publics have been established worldwide – for example in Ireland (constitutional reform, marriage equality) or France (Citizens' Climate Convention).

When transferred to educational contexts, mini citizens' assemblies enable children and young people to experience deliberative procedures within a protected framework. They practice examining information, weighing arguments, and making decisions together.

GOALS AND PRINCIPLES

Goals

- Promotion of critical thinking and dialogue competence
- Enabling participation and co-creation
- Practicing responsibility and decision-making ability
- Strengthening trust and respect within groups

Principles

1. Informedness – participants receive balanced information.
2. Equality – every voice counts, regardless of age, status, or role.
3. Argument-based reasoning – decisions are based not on volume but on reasons.
4. Respect – other perspectives are recognized, not devalued.
5. Orientation toward the common good – focus on solutions that serve as many as possible.

PROCESS AND STRUCTURE

A deliberative forum typically consists of five phases:

1. Define the topic – it must be relevant and open, e.g., sustainability at school.
2. Provide information – materials, inputs, experts, illustrative examples.
3. Small group discussion – collect arguments, develop pro and con perspectives.
4. Plenary discussion – exchange, evaluate, and prioritize options.
5. Decision-making – consensus, consent, or majority decision; followed by documentation.

SYSTEMIC PERSPECTIVE

Deliberation is not only a method but a culture of dealing with diversity and conflict.

- Schools or organizations that regularly use deliberative methods develop better decision quality and stronger democratic structures.
- Through repetition, a culture emerges in which listening, reasoning, and respect become natural habits.

INTERCULTURAL AND INCLUSIVE DIMENSION

- Take into account different communication cultures: direct vs. indirect, quiet vs. active.
- Use visualization and simple language for accessibility.
- Manage speaking time: speaking objects, timers, or speaking cards to ensure balance.
- Buddy systems: pairs or small groups help quieter participants express their arguments.
- Multilingualism: allow contributions in the first language and, if necessary, translate them.

OPPORTUNITIES

- Strengthen democratic competences – young people learn that good decisions are based on arguments, not power.
- Build trust – groups experience that every voice counts.
- Address complexity – even difficult topics can be discussed in an understandable way.
- Promote self-efficacy – participants feel: we can make a difference together.

CHALLENGES

- Preparing information: materials must be accessible and balanced.
- Time requirements: genuine deliberation takes time; short versions are only partially effective.
- Dominance of individual voices: requires skilled moderation.
- Token participation: if results are not taken seriously, motivation decreases.
- Complex topics: may need to be simplified or divided into sub-questions.

PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

- Small steps: start with a mini-forum (60–90 minutes).
- Topic selection: close to the participants' real-life experiences.
- Variety of methods: cards, posters, and digital tools for visualization.
- Documentation: make results visible (poster, recommendation paper, or digital board).
- Feedback loop: always communicate what happens with the results (e.g., implementation, forwarding to school management).

Sources / CC:

UNESCO (2015): *Global Citizenship Education – Topics and Learning Objectives* → CC BY-SA 3.0 IGO; Council of Europe (2018): *Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (RFCDC)* → not CC, referenced only

OECD (2020): *Future of Education and Skills 2030 – Conceptual Learning Framework* → CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO; (reference only, no text reproduction); Fishkin, J. (2018): *Democracy When the People Are Thinking*. Oxford University Press → not CC, cited academically

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