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## Review of Deliberation in the Classroom: Fostering Critical Thinking, Community, and Citizenship in Schools by Stacie Molnar-Main (Kettering Foundation Press, 2017)

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**Abstract**

Review of *Deliberation in the Classroom: Fostering Critical Thinking, Community, and Citizenship in Schools* by Stacie Molnar-Main (Kettering Foundation Press, 2017).

**Author Biography**

Monica L. Reeves is a graduate student pursuing a MA in Communication Studies at Kansas State University.

*Deliberation in the Classroom* is an informative and enjoyable read that clearly describes and argues for the use of deliberation in schools. The Kettering Foundation began a learning exchange with teachers in 2006 and what has now become the National Issues Forum (NIF) Teachers Network provides the knowledge base from which Molnar-Main (2017) draws from for her book. She walks the reader through the reasons for adopting deliberative practices as she provides practical help on what it is and how it can be done. The book has a hopeful tone as she focuses on how deliberation is helping to improve communication in the classroom, simultaneously teaching students important skills and building their character.

As an educator, Molnar-Main (2017) has used deliberation and she draws from that experience as well as from the experiences of many other educators whom she met through the Teachers Network. Because others have already provided a strong explanation of the theoretical foundation for these practices, Molnar-Main (2017) focuses on supplementing the wealth of knowledge that is already available by offering stories of teachers who are impacting students. The real life examples enrich the book and provide a helpful overview of the challenges and benefits of using deliberation in the classroom.

Communication in the U.S. media can be destructive and divisive, especially when it comes to political issues. In the midst of this volatile climate, the book points out that many U.S. citizens are not playing an active role in voting or carrying out other civic duties. Some believe that the things they care about are not addressed or that their voice does not matter. Others may draw conclusions too quickly and make a decision based on inadequate or incomplete information. With these challenges and others in mind, Molnar-Main (2017) argues for the use of deliberation in schools. She believes that “. . . civic education should at least provide students with the practical skills and dispositions they need to analyze information, ask questions, build arguments, express agreement and dissent, understand others, and work across divides for the common good” (p. 5). One of the biggest advantages to teaching in this style is that it gives opportunities for students to participate who are typically quieter in class, thereby encouraging everyone to think about the voices not always represented.

Molnar-Main (2017) acknowledges the reality of obstacles for teachers at various points throughout the book. With our education system focused on testing, we are moving away from teaching that can help students grow in skills like “. . . how to listen critically, ask effective questions, and push for answers in the face of challenges” (p. 33). The pressures to complete core standards and perform well on tests could lead teachers away from doing something more innovative and

atypical like using a NIF Issues Guide to teach students about U.S. historical events. Molnar –Main (2017) recognizes this and points out that the Teachers Network addresses common challenges like this one. She describes how these practices can be woven into the classroom in ways that help both teachers and students. Though not without obstacles to overcome, schools and teachers who adopt these practices believe the benefits make the effort worth it.

This book is a solid argument for the use of deliberation in schools. Students grow in empathy, listening skills, thinking critically, and as one educator says, learn to “disagree without being unlikable” (p. 11). Educators would benefit from reading this book as well as anyone who believes that deliberation can improve communication in our world as a whole. Written in a way that can speak to educators new to deliberation or to experts in the field, *Deliberation in the Classroom* is informative and understandable as it contributes an interesting description of using deliberation in education. There are those that say that the goals and work of deliberation are too idealistic, but this book paints a picture of how it could impact the world for the better.

Molnar-Main (2017) ends with a powerful example of a Wisconsin school that had fully implemented deliberative teaching practices. In the aftermath of a tragic student death during a confrontation in the community, teachers were encouraged to see the level of empathy and respect that students showed to one another. Molnar-Main writes,

The students at EEA had developed the capacity, as a community, to face an unspeakable tragedy together. They were not concerned with laying blame or distracted by the media hype. They wanted to support each other and they wanted to talk about what they and their community could do to address a public problem. They had a vocabulary for talking about the issue, and they had the ability to work together in the face of uncertainty because they were in the habit of deliberating. Mostly through, they were acting as citizens-citizens who have a stake in their community, and who are committed to working together to claim a better future. (p. 95)

This real-life example is a powerful conclusion and illustrates the way that deliberation in the classroom has the potential to have long-lasting impacts. If a person is not already a believer in using this approach in the classroom, it will be difficult to still hold that view after reading this book.

## Reference

Molnar-Main, S. (2017). *Deliberation in the classroom: Fostering critical thinking, community, and citizenship in schools*. Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation.