ENABLING CHILDREN’S DELIBERATION
SCHOOLS AS A MEDIATING SPACE IN
DELIBERATIVE SYSTEMS

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Enabling children’s deliberation Schools as a mediating space in deliberative systems

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**Abstract**

What is the role of schools in a democratic society? Democracy scholars traditionally answer this question by conceptualizing schools as educational institutions where children’s preparations for future democratic engagement are promoted. However, recent work on deliberative democracy, namely the “deliberative systems” framework, highlights complex roles of schools in democracy. In advancing our understanding of democratic roles of schools, the author conducted fieldwork conducted with Japanese school students who actively engage in deliberative actions in and beyond their schools. The fieldwork reveals that schools can contribute to deliberative systems by mediating between children’s everyday experiences and democratic engagements in the broader public space through deliberative socialization, empowerment, and networking. On the basis of the findings, this article suggests a reconceptualization of schools in democracy as a “mediating space.”

**Keywords**

Children / schools / deliberative democracy / deliberative systems / mediating space
INTRODUCTION

What is the role of schools in a democratic society? One dominant view is that they serve as educational institutions that focus on the process of knowledge transfer and preparations for children’s future democratic engagement (e.g. Gutmann, 1999; Crittenden, 2002; Englund, 2011). Quite often, however, such arguments dismiss other democratic purposes of schools. In specific contexts, for example, schools can play a role as public spaces (Kelly, 2003; Flanagan, 2013) that offer a discursive arena, and as social spaces (Black, 2008; Senge, 2013) whose various connections with other social agents promote children’s substantive civic engagement in the wider society.

In advancing our understanding of the potential roles of schools in democracy, this article focuses on recent work on deliberative democracy, namely the deliberative systems framework (Dryzek, 2010; Mansbridge et al., 2012), as it can shed light on the democratic purposes that schools serve. Deliberative democracy situates reflective, inclusive and reciprocal communicative interactions among citizens at the core of the democratic process, and deliberative systems comprise the differentiated yet interrelated micro-deliberations happening across different spaces (e.g., legislatures, civil society, the Internet, social movements, everyday settings, and so forth). With deliberative systems, the goal is to understand how these micro-deliberations together create large-scale macro systems, thereby realizing democratic consequences. In deliberative systems, the democratic roles of schools can be interpreted and appreciated with respect to their contributions to other micro-deliberations as well as wider macro systems. Such a systemic perspective highlights the relationships between the multiple roles of schools and wider deliberative systems, thereby revealing various democratic dynamics of schools.

It should be made clear that I am not claiming that every school can always contribute to deliberative systems. As critical pedagogy scholars often indicate, many schools across the globe are still based on hierarchical characteristics, which are the opposite of deliberation and democracy (e.g., Feinstein et al., 2010). Thus, what is important to ask is under what conditions schools can contribute to deliberative systems. In responding to this question, this article draws on data gained from a fieldwork project conducted with Japanese school students. Their lived experience shows that, when schools offer students deliberative socialization, empowerment, and networking in response to their specific needs and requirements, schools can mediate between their everyday experiences and wider public deliberations, and then contribute to deliberative systems in what I refer to as a mediating space. The data also reveal that even a school, whose educational quality can be evaluated as low with respect to the traditional understanding of schools as educational institutions, can nevertheless serve as a mediating space when various mediating factors compensate for the school’s educational weaknesses.

This article begins by outlining previous studies’ education-centric understanding of schools in a democratic society, and then foreshadows the limitation of this understanding. Next, in approaching the complex role of schools in democracy, the deliberative systems framework is introduced. The subsequent section draws on the fieldwork data to reveal how schools empirically contribute to deliberative systems. Based on the empirical findings, the last section suggests a reconceptualization of schools as a mediating space.

This article focuses on school students (especially those aged 12 to 17), and thus the term “children” and “students” are used interchangeably.
THE ROLES OF SCHOOLS IN A DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY

Democracy scholars traditionally focus on specific public forums where democracy matters, such as legislatures, civil society, or well-designed civic forums, and schools are usually understood as peripheral spaces marked off from such forums (Gutmann, 1999; Crittenden, 2002). Instead, schools are usually viewed as educational institutions that are expected to “have an impact on how children are socialized” (Steiner, 2011, p. 267), so that they can internalize necessary democratic values, skills, and attitudes. In particular, democracy scholars envision that well-designed school education allows children to “have knowledge and judgment sufficient to make informed decisions and the thoughtfulness or critical-thinking skills” (Crittenden, 2002, p. 112). It is widely expected that school education can enhance the quality of democracy in an indirect but a significant way (Latimer & Hempson, 2012). For example, future civic forums may benefit greatly when children internalize specific democratic values (Gutmann, 1999).

Against this backdrop, much empirical research also focuses on varieties of the civic education curriculum as it creates a space where children can learn and experience democracy in the classroom. Various educational practices have been conducted such as Democracy Day (Davis et al., 1998), (quasi-)Deliberative Poll (Luskin et al., 2007; Latimer & Hempson, 2012), and Kids Voting (McDevitt & Kiousis, 2004).

However, some scholars are also quite skeptical about understanding schools only in terms of education because such a view tends to dismiss other significant democratic purposes of schools. Once we focus on the “political” dimension of schools, for example, they can be understood as public spaces. Schools as public spaces – sometimes described as “counter-publics” (Kelly, 2003; cf. Fraser, 1992) – can offer a discursive arena where children can challenge dominant discourses. It is argued that children and their parents with different socioeconomic backgrounds and ideologies (e.g., Hess, 2009) can bring various “political” issues into their schools (e.g., bullying as a result of poverty or gender discrimination), which thus encourage children to “question, contest, and reinterpret dominant narratives and, in the process, build the foundations of social change” (Flanagan, 2013, p. 22).

Furthermore, when we take into account the social condition in which schools are embedded, schools can be described as social spaces. As Senge (2012) notes, schools are located within a web of social and political connections with a variety of institutions and agents (e.g. government, local communities, businesses, families, universities, and the media). Black (2008) indicates that the connectivity of schools is quite varied in that it encompasses formal/informal, fixed/fluid, extensive/intimate, and short-/long-term dimensions. If such diverse connections with broader society are used effectively by children, they may be able to make effective use of their school experiences for their out-of-school activities (Hayward, 2012; Senge, 2012).

It should be made clear that I am not claiming that schools as public and social spaces are more important than schools as educational institutions. But, insofar as we see schools solely in terms of education and preparation, other potential roles of schools in a democratic society are neglected. How can we then rethink the democratic roles of schools?
SITUATING SCHOOLS IN DELIBERATIVE SYSTEMS

In responding to the above question, this article focuses on the idea of deliberative democracy, especially in regard to recent innovative work on deliberative systems, as a helpful framework to understand the complex relationship between schools and democracy.

Deliberative democracy situates reflective, inclusive, and reciprocal communicative interactions among citizens at the core of the democratic process. Through communicative interactions among differently situated people, deliberation is ideally expected to realize four interrelated goals: inclusion of diverse voices, reflective preference change, mutual understanding in a divided society, and taken together democratic decision-making (e.g., Gutmann & Thompson, 1996). The core claim of deliberative systems is then that these four goals of deliberative democracy do not all need to be achieved simultaneously within a single forum. Rather, its primary concern is how these purposes are achieved at a system level. The term “system” here means, according to Mansbridge et al. (2012, p. 4), “a set of distinguishable, differentiated, but to some degree independent parts, often distributed functions and a division of labor connected in such a way to form a complex whole.” Deliberative systems scholars ask how the functional division of labor among micro deliberations occurring across different venues (e.g., civil society, social movements, Internet-based deliberation) works together and then fulfills the goals of deliberative democracy at a large scale (Dryzek, 2010). This means that even seemingly “low-quality” deliberative acts (e.g., protests) can still serve important functions within broader deliberative systems (e.g., Mansbridge et al, 2012) insofar as they contribute to those systems. Hence, instead of restricting venues for deliberation within the confines of a single forum, deliberative systems allow us to notice the deliberative capacities not only of officially empowered spaces but also of public spaces and even of private spaces (Mansbridge, 1999; Conover & Searing, 2005; Stevenson & Dryzek, 2014).

However, we must avoid the pitfall of collapsing everything into deliberative systems. Each deliberative practice should be evaluated with respect to its contribution to other micro-deliberations and/or to macro-scale systems. To this end, the following four functions are mentioned as criteria to evaluate each micro-deliberation (cf. Mansbridge et al., 2012, pp. 11-12).

The first one is the epistemic function for reflective preference change and democratic decision-making, which aims at making well-considered opinions and decisions about a contested common concern through a process of reason-exchange, justification, reflection, and listening. The second is the ethical function whose primary goal is to promote mutual-understanding across difference in order to create a common foundation for effective deliberation in a divided society. The third is the democratic function, which contributes to the inclusion of multiple concerns, interests, and voices. To support the above three functions, the systemic function is also important. Deliberative systems are no mere patchworks of isolated deliberative practices; rather, they must situate a systemic conjunction at the core so that insufficiencies of each part can be remedied at a systemic level. Hence, inducers of such interaction should be counted as important components of deliberative systems (Dryzek, 2010; Mendonça, 2016). It should be noted again that we do not need to presuppose “the best possible single deliberative forum” (Mansbridge et al., p. 1) that realizes all these functions at once. The primary concern of deliberative systems is how these functions are realized through the conjunction of a variety of deliberations across society.
Under such a systemic perspective, the roles and meanings of schools can also be considered not just in terms of the traditional definition of schools as educational institutions, but rather in terms of their systemic contributions. For example, Hayward’s (2012) empirical research on community schools in New Zealand offers insights into how these schools provide students with opportunities to deliberate about environmental concerns they experience (e.g., water and air pollution, the impacts of a large earthquake in Christchurch) and thereby to develop their political awareness, elaborate their opinions, and motivate their further environmental engagements outside their schools. These schools are no mere educational institutions, but rather a sort of public space that can enhance the *democratic* quality of deliberative systems where children bring various “political” concerns into their schools, deliberate on common questions that ought to be discussed in a wider public, and promote further civic engagement. Moreover, these schools can also serve as social spaces (Senge, 2012), contributing to vitalize the systemic function of deliberative systems in a way that bridges children’s micro-experiences of deliberation and other out-of-school deliberative actions.

The systemic view allows us to evaluate the role and meaning of schools with respect to their contributions to other deliberative parts and wider systems, which makes it possible to explain the role of schools in deliberative democracy in more flexible ways.

**JAPANESE CHILDREN’S DELIBERATION IN AND BEYOND SCHOOLS**

The above theorization of schools in democracy however does not lead to a conclusion that deliberative systems can always be applied to all schools positively. Some critical pedagogy scholars argue that indoctrination and hierarchy are still dominant in the majority of schools across the globe, and this educational paradigm is opposed to both democracy and deliberation (Kelly 2003; Feinstein 2010). Hence, even if the deliberative systems framework highlights the multiple roles of schools in democracy, this does not mean that schools can always function in a productive manner. The important question to be asked is *under what conditions* schools can be appreciated as a meaningful part of deliberative systems. I now turn to view empirical cases informed by my fieldwork conducted with Japanese school students (aged 12-17) from September to December 2016.

The fieldwork pursued two aims. On the one hand, it attempted to reveal how schools enable children’s deliberation in and beyond schools effectively. On the other hand, it also considered under what conditions schools can contribute to deliberative systems. This fieldwork did not aim to research a representative sample of the school-aged population, but rather to examine contextualized views and stories about the complex relationships among children, schools, and deliberative systems. Hence, the sample schools and students were recruited strategically rather than through a process that would yield randomization.

The fieldwork focused on students who engage in Ari To Pla (a teenager-centered deliberative group), TFT (a child-adult collaborative deliberative workshop), and T-ns SOWL (a teenagers’ activist group). Ari To Pla and TFT were organized by students in School 1 (combined junior high and high school), whereas some students in School 2 (high school) joined T-ns SOWL. I selected these cases because these groups were organized and anchored by different factors within their schools. For example, School 1 has two types
The original motivation for organizing Ari To Pla was students’ experiences with the deliberation curriculum called *Philosophy for Children (P4C)* (Lipman, 2003) in advanced-level classroom. TFT was organized by a student in School 1, but his class (general classroom) did not introduce P4C or any other relevant deliberative curriculum. Yet, as a result of some meaningful support offered by his school, he eventually organized TFT. As for the students in School 2 who joined T-ns SOWL, their school had no deliberative curriculum. But such schooling conditions paradoxically enhanced students’ political identity, thereby enabling them to act as deliberators. As we shall see below in more detail, these different school and classroom conditions and different types of deliberative engagement allow analysis of the multiple roles of schools in deliberative systems.

During the fieldwork, I conducted participatory observations of students’ deliberative actions in and beyond their schools (39 practices with 397 students), taking field notes and using an audio recorder. Based on the observed data, I recruited some students as interviewees (24 students) who actively joined the out-of-school deliberative actions. During the interviews, I asked them about their self-understanding of their deliberative engagements and about the contributions of their schools to their activities. In highlighting their experiences more clearly, I also had informal conversations with many students and teachers, and conducted formal interviews with selected teachers (four teachers) who knew of their students’ deliberative engagements. In accordance with research ethics guidelines, all information that may identify individuals (e.g., name of school and interviewee) is omitted to ensure anonymity.

I transcribed the recorded data and coded and categorized important information, in order to clarify the systemic contributions of the cases. In what follows, I outline the lived experiences of students’ deliberative engagement in Ari To Pla, TFT, and T-ns SOWL respectively, and then in each case explain the contributions of schools to deliberative systems.

**ARI TO PLA**

Beginning in 2012, the advanced-level classrooms in School 1 introduced the P4C curriculum. P4C is a designed classroom deliberation where students talk about their common ethical, political, or philosophical questions generated from their everyday experiences. In P4C, students sit in a circle in the classroom with a teacher as a facilitator and engage in a collaborative inquiry. P4C encourages them to deliberate with friends who have different perspectives and opinions, by supplying reasons; assisting each other in drawing inferences from unsupported opinions and from what has been said; and helping them to identify one another’s assumptions (Lipman, 2003). P4C then allows students to challenge dominant or taken-for-granted discourses and social norms. This experience can, according to Kizel (2016, p. 510), “develop a sense of social, political and economic activism in their members, serving as a space in which the great questions of life can be addressed.”

One day, P4C teachers suggested to some students (Students G-O) who engaged actively in the classroom dialogue that they could hold a dialogue event in their school festival. Some adults (e.g., parents and local community members) and other students were invited to think and talk together about students’ questions. This event however did not work well, according to students. What
students experienced there was an encounter with adult participants who were not ready to listen to students’ voices. Many adults forced their beliefs and opinions onto the children, or talked nonstop about their stories, thereby preventing children from having opportunities to express their views. During the interview, some students complained about these adults:

Student I: I think it can’t be helped that adults have fixed beliefs and opinions. But what I want them to do is just to listen to our voices. We understand their claims, but we would also like to alter their attitudes toward something that can listen to our opinion (15-year-old girl).

Student O: As I predicted, adults had a fixed image of children. It made them underestimate our opinion (15-year-old boy).

Student G (15-year-old girl) also expressed her outright displeasure about the adults. But she also had a strong desire to continue philosophical dialogue with her friends. She then asked her teacher to prepare an out-of-school space so that she could organize a monthly deliberation group called Ari To Pla (named after Aristotle and Plato – “To” means “and” in Japanese). In Ari To Pla, participants deliberate about their common concerns by using the P4C method they experienced. According to Student G, the unique characteristic of Ari To Pla was that in principle only teenagers are allowed to join it in order to avoid adult's paternalistic manipulation and intervention. The following statement describes her intention to initiate the group:

Student G: I think adults tend to have a lot more experiences than us, and for better or worse these experiences make them refuse to change their ideas and accept new opinions. So they often dominate the dialogue by speaking about their fixed beliefs and opinions. But we as students usually do not have so much experience like adults and therefore we can accept various opinions.

But after conducting deliberation in this group several times, she gradually noticed the value of listening to adults’ opinions as they can offer different perspectives that children usually do not have. Thus, while Ari To Pla is in principle a teenager-only group, she deliberated with Student L (15-year-old boy) and finally decided that only adults who are ready to see students as equals with respect can participate in Ari To Pla. This rule gives student participants a sense of safety during their deliberation. One student participant who came from a different school appreciated Ari To Pla’s child-centricity in the following manner:

Student C: Compared to the lecture in my classroom, I can concentrate on dialogue because there is no adult like a teacher or parent who makes me rushed when I consider my opinion. So I can enjoy the time to keep on thinking deeply and slowly (13-year-old girl).

This statement illustrates two deliberative democratic dynamics of Ari to Pla. While children in public spaces are usually required to follow the rules and norms of the participation defined by adults (Ennew, 2007), Ari To Pla reverses such a “traditional” relationship between adults and children in the public space by requiring adults to follow rules and procedures set by children. In this sense, Ari
To Pla plays a role as (1) a democratic public space where the asymmetrical relationship between adults and children is mitigated by requiring adults to see children as equals, with respect, and in parallel; (2) a “deliberative enclave” (Karpowitz et al., 2009) where children as disempowered individuals can have a relatively safe and protected deliberative space away from the influence of adults. Ari To Pla itself is not a group designed to exert a substantive influence over the official decisions or resolving public problems. However, it can reconstruct a traditional relationship between adults and children in a public space, empower them by offering a relatively free and open communication space where their voices are heard, and then facilitate their inclusion in Japanese society.

**TFT (THE FUTURE TALK)**

The story of Student T (13-year-old boy) in the general classroom in School 1, which did not introduce the P4C curriculum also sheds light on the democratic role of School 1 in a different way. When he was an elementary school student, he was selected as a child interviewer in a nonprofit organization’s project. He then visited the Philippines to interview Filipino kids who suffered in the wake of Typhoon Haiyan in 2013. After entering School 1, he still wanted to share his experience with others. But he did not have any methods and ideas to translate his aspiration into reality. One day, however, he heard by chance about P4C from his friend in the advanced-level classroom. He then got interested in P4C. He said:

Student T: After getting back from the Philippines, I thought about what I can do. But, no answer could be gained when I thought alone about it. That’s why I wanted to think with others. If we exchange opinions and discuss over and over, I think it may be possible for us to get a better idea. Then, I got to know P4C and I found it really useful.

Author: Ok, but why P4C?

Student T: Ah, the biggest reason was simply because my friends did it in their class. I then collected information on P4C and participated in Ari To Pla, which was very nice. In P4C, everyone can express their own opinion freely. Sometimes they are sympathetic to my opinion, and sometimes they value what I say. These experiences help to produce more and more new ideas.

He then asked his teacher to support his project for a deliberative workshop called TFT (*The Future Talk*) where both children and adult citizens talk about controversial political issues in Japan. The teacher then got in touch with a professor at the University of Tokyo Centre for Philosophy (UTCP) to ask for its support for Student T’s plan. Student T and UTCP announced the TFT project to the broader public, and they finally held TFT at the University of Tokyo in August 2015, where around 30 participants gathered. In TFT, Student T at first reported what he experienced during his interviews with Filipino kids, and then participants deliberated together about questions on global poverty and global cooperation using the P4C method. TFT eventually enabled adult participants to get interested in hearing children’s opinions, and Student T was asked to organize another TFT several months later.
In March 2011, Student U (16-year-old girl) experienced first-hand the disastrous tsunami and nuclear power plant accident in Fukushima, Japan. This experience boosted her interest in Japanese politics, including issues such as managing the risks of nuclear power plants, irresponsible politicians, and so forth. However, her school had no curriculum that allowed her to speak about politics, and few of her friends respected her political interests:

Student U: When I said to my friends that I am interested in politics, they often just gave me frosty eyes, which was not what I expected. Then I noticed that talking about politics might spoil the good relationship between us. This made me feel hesitant to talk about it.

Author: What do you mean by “talking about political issues may spoil the good relationship”?

Student U: They saw me as strange. This was really serious for me.

A similar concern was reported by other students. For example, Student V (17-year-old girl) said:

Student V: I didn’t want to talk about politics with my schoolmates [...] I’m proud of my activity, and so I really got hurt when they teased me. They said “I think protesting is meaningless! That’s a waste of time!” I felt alone. No sympathy.

For both girls, School 2 was neither a deliberative nor a democratic space. But at the same time their stories also show that such “undemocratic” school conditions paradoxically became an enabler for their out-of-school deliberative commitments. For example, while Student U and Student V were disappointed with their schooling experiences, those experiences motivated them to seek alternative ways to protect and express their political identities. One day, Student U found information about the teenager-initiated activist group called T-ns SOWL (Teens Stand up to Oppose War Law), which protested against a self-defense bill proposed by the Japanese government. She found this group attractive because:

Student U: In T-ns, there were even younger students than me who were very familiar with politics. This made me really...really surprised. I was deeply concerned about a situation where young people tend to avoid discussing politics. In reverse, T-ns gave me a safe space and allowed me to talk about politics.

When she described T-ns SOWL as a “safe space,” the underlying intention was the comparison with her “unsafe” experience in her school. As an alternative to her school, she found a relatively safe space where she could identify what she called “political friends,” which were otherwise hard to find in her school. Again, such alternative-seeking was possible because her school enabled her to encounter opposing discourses and individuals who had different perspectives on politics.
Some deliberative democrats may claim that activism is opposed to the ideals of deliberation (Medearis, 2005). But the deliberative systems framework can appreciate the deliberative dynamics of activism because some forms of activism, though not all, can create a new pathway through which previously ignored voices are heard, thereby boosting further deliberation in the wider society (Mendonça, 2016). Together with other activist groups that also resisted against the self-defense bill, for example, T-ns SOWL (and Students U and V) called for further governmental deliberation and pointed out the lack of accountability of governments so that the lawmaking process became more deliberative and democratic.

ENABLING CHILDREN’S DELIBERATION: SCHOOLS AS A MEDIATING SPACE

As we have seen, differently situated students use (or do not use) the various functions of schools in different ways. The fieldwork allows the researcher to approach the contextualized and constructed social phenomena, thereby revealing the multiple meaning of the “reality” emerging from the field (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012). Such emergent realities then offer three specific implications and three possible limitations of the contributions of schools to deliberative systems, which may help in advancing our understanding of the democratic roles of schools.

_Schools as a mediating space_

Most notably, one of the important democratic contributions of schools in the above cases is that each school mediates students’ micro-level (deliberative) experiences and wider public deliberations. In the Ari To Pla case, P4C in the classroom and school festival increased students’ motivation to organize Ari To Pla. In the case of TFT, connections provided by the teacher helped Student T to realize his project by bridging his personal experience in interviewing Filipino kids and his project of TFT. Also, even the seemingly “disappointing” and “undemocratic” conditions in School 2 paradoxically strengthened some students’ political interest and enabled their commitment to activism. In such ways, schools enable students to engage in public deliberation (e.g., Ari To Pla, TFT, T-ns SOWL) that can function _ethically_ (by mitigating the existing asymmetrical relationship between children and adults or by creating a space where adults can learn from children’s experiences – Ari To Pla, TFT); _democratically_ (by informing children’s traditionally silenced voices and concerns for the broader public –TFT and T-ns SOWL); and/or _systemically_ (by offering substantive pathways by which children use their school and everyday experiences for their out-of-school activity – Ari To Pla, TFT).

Viewed in this light, schools in deliberative systems can be conceptualized as a _mediating space_, not just as educational institutions. The term “mediating space” is a coined term, but there exist similar discussions, such as Berger’s (1976) “mediating structures” and Wolbrecht’s (2005) “mediating institutions.” While both concepts were introduced in different contexts than the present one, their shared claim is that there is a social space standing “between the individual in his private space and the large institution of public sphere” (Berger, 1976, p. 401). The primary purpose of a mediating space is to provide individuals – especially those who have limited access to the wider public space – with a first step to get them engaged in public actions, and the schools described above indeed function in this manner.
The factors that make schools serve as a mediating space are varied. In particular, the above cases allow us to recognize the following three “mediating factors” that enable children’s deliberation across deliberative systems – that is, deliberative socialization, empowerment, and networking.

School 1 provided its students with opportunities for deliberative socialization (e.g. P4C) that is grounded in the idea of learning by doing. P4C enabled students to experience deliberation anchored by reason-exchange and mutual-respect, thereby helping their understanding of how to deliberate with differently situated others. This learning-by-doing process eventually helped students to apply the deliberative experiences in their classroom to their out-of-school deliberative commitments (Ari To Pla).

Schools in some situations also enabled students’ empowerment by promoting their encounters with different others and helping them to form their own opinions. In the dialogue event that took place at the school festival, for example, students in advanced-level classrooms in School 1 encountered adults who did not take children’s voices into consideration seriously. This experience in turn motivated them to organize a relatively safe and protected deliberative enclave where they could engage in open and free deliberation without any anxiety. As a result, Ari To Pla reversed a biased relationship between students and adults in the public space and created a space where voices of students could be heard. Furthermore, School 2 promoted students’ encounters with different perspectives and discourses. Although some friends disempowered both Student T and Student U by disregarding their political interests and identities, such conditions paradoxically strengthened their political identity and awareness. They eventually shifted their attention from the confines of their school toward the wider society (e.g., T-ns SOWL).

In specific contexts, furthermore, each school provided its students with various opportunities for networking in order to support their substantive deliberative participation beyond their schools. In realizing Ari To Pla, students used some existing networks (e.g., the school festival and the out-of-school public space). These networks offered students pathways through which they could use their empowered and socialized experiences in their school and classrooms for their out-of-school deliberative engagements. Likewise, chains of networks gained from School 1 enabled Student T to organize TFT, which included (1) his friends who experienced P4C in their classroom and let him know about it, (2) Ari To Pla where Student T could learn how to deliberate with others, (3) a teacher who supported Student T’s plan of TFT by introducing (4) a professor at the University of Tokyo and (5) UTCP.

It is also worthy of attention that schools can serve as mediating spaces despite lacking some mediating factors. While students of Ari To Pla utilized all mediating factors available at their school, the stories of students in the cases of TFT and T-ns SOWL show that their schools were not the “perfect” mediating space. For example, School 1 did not provide Student T with any opportunity for deliberative socialization in the classroom. Additionally, Student T did not need to enjoy the opportunity of empowerment because he already formulated his concern, interest, and opinion not through his school experience but through his personal experiences of interviewing Filipino kids. Likewise, School 2 did not offer any learning-by-doing type of curriculum. As a result, students had very limited opportunity to learn how to deliberate. Finally, School 2 did not serve as a social space, as it did not offer its students any networking in promoting their out-of-school deliberative commitments. However, as the stories of some students show, even
a school that lacks some mediating factors can nevertheless supply a unique incentive to get its students involved in deliberation across society, insofar as other mediating factors remedy the absence or failure of specific mediating factors. This viewpoint may resonate with the core claim of deliberative systems that require us to look at a systemic division of labor, rather than to envision a “perfect” single deliberative forum. In this sense, the dynamics of democratic schools in deliberative systems need to be evaluated from different angles, asking whether schools can adequately offer various mediating factors such as deliberative socialization, empowerment, and/or networking in response to their students’ specific needs and requirements.

**Schools and classrooms**

Another important lesson arising from the case is the need to distinguish between schools and classrooms when seeking to understand the role of schools in deliberative systems. Since previous studies tend to focus on the significance of children’s classroom deliberation, the role of schools in deliberative democracy is understood within the confines of the relationship between children’s “classroom” performance and wider deliberative democracy (e.g., Crittenden, 2002; Luskin et al., 2006; Hess, 2009; Englund, 2011). Yet, as the cases of TFT and T-ns SOWL illustrate, children can act as deliberators by using other mediating factors of their “school” (e.g., networking), even if there is no opportunity for students to deliberate in the classroom. This implies that even a school, whose educational quality can be evaluated as low with respect to the traditional understanding of schools as educational institutions, can nevertheless serve as a mediating space when various mediating factors compensate for the school’s educational weaknesses. The important message is therefore that we should not limit the deliberative dynamics of “schools” only to the confines of the “classroom.”

**Toward inclusive deliberative systems**

Beyond the debates around the role of schools in democracy, the cases presented above also provide insights into the applicability of a mediating space for the broader context of deliberative democracy. More specifically, this concept hints at a way of bridging people’s deliberative experiences in private and public spaces. Some deliberative systems scholars recognize the capacity of private space to foster inclusive deliberation. As Mansbridge (1999) notes, private space can allow previously disempowered individuals to deliberate about issues that the public ought to discuss, thereby empowering their deliberative agency and motivating them to deliberate beyond their private space. Conover and Searing’s (2005, p. 281) empirical work also shows that everyday talk in private settings “helps citizens to work out their preferences, try out justifications for them, and develop confidence about performing in the public arena.” Unfortunately, though, these scholars tend to avoid making a case for how deliberation in private spaces can be transmitted to deliberative systems at a large scale. Against this backdrop, the concept of mediating space may offer a valuable insight because its primary function is “mediation” between private and public spaces. It tells us that our society has various spaces that can potentially be identified as mediating spaces (e.g., churches, parks, universities, social media, and companies: cf. Burger, 1967; Wolbrecht, 2005), and designing these spaces in deliberative democracy terms may help to bridge people’s micro-deliberative experiences and the wider society.
Three limitations of schools as mediating spaces in deliberative systems

The above cases also reveal some limitations of schools as mediating spaces. First, schools do not always serve as mediating spaces for all students. Although some students are interested in deliberative participation, many more may not be. The mediating role of schools would therefore be beneficial mostly for those who are already interested in deliberation. Even if a school is capable of offering all three mediating factors, it does not promise that all students will act as deliberators in deliberative systems. Thus we should not romanticize the deliberative and democratic potential of schools.

Second, schools have quite limited connectivity with official political forums (e.g., legislatures). Although some scholars (Black, 2008; Senge, 2012) point out that schools have a degree of connection with official forums, the main agents who can use such connections are teachers and parents rather than children. While the fieldwork revealed various networked pathways connecting children’s private and school life with public space, no connection with the officially empowered space could be found. In this sense, although schools are worth counting as components of deliberative systems, it would be quite hard, though not impossible, for them to exert their substantive influence over official public decision-making.

Third, the fieldwork focused strategically on “positive” mediating processes of schools. But schools’ “mediating factors” may not always promise a productive (or deliberative democratic) consequence for democracy because there could be “inhibiting factors” that aim to disconnect children from the broader deliberative systems. For example, Cairns (1996) indicates that during wartime schools can become an incubator of children’s out-of-school commitment to guerrilla or terrorist activities. In identifying whether the mediating factors of schools work in a productive way, it is important to understand the context in which the school is embedded and what sort of inhibiting factors potentially exist in that context.

CONCLUSION

Instead of relying on a narrow definition of schools as educational institutions, the deliberative systems framework highlights alternative roles of schools such as public spaces and social spaces, viewing schools in relation to their function and contribution to other micro-deliberative parts and wider deliberative systems. The in-depth fieldwork then reveals conditions under which schools can play a part as deliberative systems. The data tell us that when schools serve as mediating spaces through deliberative socialization, empowerment, and networking, they enable children’s deliberation across different venues in deliberative systems.
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