

SPACE: Student Perspectives About Civic Engagement

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Editorial

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2018 Editorial for *Student Perspectives About Civic Engagement* (SPACE)

“My optimism,” wrote Chinese essayist and poet Shao Yanxiang, “doesn’t smile all the time. It has rolled in the mud. It’s been struck on an anvil....It burned in a bonfire that almost went out. For a while people scornfully called it dead ash” (Yanxiang, 1990, p. 43). Yanxiang, a critic of China in the 1950s, knew a thing or two about keeping optimism alive when it seemed all hope was lost. At the end of his poem, he concludes: “Adult optimism isn’t always sweet....I once heard it choking back sobs. But it woke out of its grief....Caught my hand. Comforted my heart....My long-suffering weather-beaten optimism” (Yanxiang, 1990, p. 44).

And so it has seemed to many in America during this past year; pessimism about the very future of democracy or the ability to engage in civil discourse hangs like a pall. Yet for many other Americans, the recent tide of political events has been a source of great hope and optimism about their vision of what the country should be. Supporters of both sides seem fired up by a new urge to become civically engaged: to organize, to protest, to vote, to run for office. So which times do we live in: the best or the worst? Are there good reasons to be optimistic about the state of democracy and civic engagement in the United States?

Examples point to both hope and dismay. The entire November 2017 issue of *Educational Leadership*, a publication of the ASCD, is devoted to increasing civics and service-learning education in schools. Reborra (2017) cites the election year of 2016 as the impetus for their decision: “After long being treated as a kind of afterthought or luxury in the curriculum, civic education is having a definite moment—one in which...the stakes are high for both schools and the country” (p. 1). They quote like-minded authors of an article in *The Atlantic*, who suggest the past election year was a “sputnik moment for civics education” (Kahlenberg & Janey, 2017, para. 4). At the same time, a recent, oft-cited poll of Millennials revealed that only about 30% of those who responded believed living in a democracy was essential (Howe, 2017). Illinois is in the process of implementing a new law requiring a full semester of high school civics education—with an emphasis on action civics and service-learning (Illinois State Board of Education, 2017). Yet pushback began before the law was even implemented, led by educators who complained that curriculum requirements were already onerous enough. Students in the Chicago Public School system are now required to complete two “classroom-integrated” service-learning projects for graduation (Chicago Public Schools, 2018), leading the cynical to speak in side conversations, wondering how long it will be before this new commitment to civic engagement reverts to teachers signing off on meaningless service hours. More than 60 CPS high schools now host Student Voice Committees, despite spoken and unspoken concerns that getting high school students fired up about issues might lead to false expectations—or perhaps real ones—about being heard as equal partners and cocreators of their schools and communities.

Which is it: a time of promise or a time for despair? Perhaps a proverb might help mediate between the two: If I keep an olive branch in my heart, a singing bird will come. To that end, we offer a few olive branches of inspiration. Now in its third year, *SPACE* continues to provide a place where students can reflect on how civic engagement and service-learning projects have an impact on the people they serve as well as how those experiences transform their own learning.

Daniel Calderon-Aponte explores how working with immigrants can—and should—be a reciprocal experience of volunteers learning from immigrant cultures rather than simply engaging in unidirectional acculturation. Indeed, his reflection speaks to the essential vision of America as a country strengthened by a synthesis of cultures. Itzel Ruiz, Jason Mink, and Xochitl

Aleman explore reasons behind high truancy rates among urban high school students. Through their research, they conclude that the student–teacher relationship is critical in reducing truancy; teachers must make their curriculum engaging while nurturing connections between themselves and their students who are at risk for deciding not to attend school. Finally, Nicole Karwowski, Sania Zaffar, Rachel Phillips, Katelyn Sullivan, and Holly Laws recount their work with urban middle school students during a summer institute designed to develop leadership and civic identity by allowing young people to make and drive decisions about how best to serve their communities. We hope you will find these diverse examples of civic engagement and service to be a source of encouragement and, perhaps, even optimism.

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