Safe/Brave Spaces: Engaging Future Citizens through School Libraries

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Safe/Brave Spaces: Engaging Future Citizens through School Libraries
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By
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“The practice of democracy is not passed down through the gene pool. It must be taught and learned anew by each generation of citizens.” — Justice Sandra Day O’Connor

Following the 2016 election, many Americans lamented the decline of our democracy. A 2017 survey conducted by the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) verified this concern, finding that more than 1/3 of young adults have lost faith in our democracy and only ¼ had confidence in our democratic system. (2017). Since Robert Putnam popularized this decline in his best-selling book: Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community (2000), partisanship and political polarization have risen to record highs. Yet, as noted by Eric Liu in his Atlantic article, “How Donald Trump Is Reviving American Democracy,” the 2016 election just might turn out as “the greatest thing to happen to America’s civic and political ecosystem in decades…mak[ing] up for decades of atrophy and neglect in civic education and engagement” (2017). Leading educators and others contend that civic learning opportunities help young people develop the skills, dispositions and values essential to becoming active citizens, countering recent trends that undermine our democracy.

Two of those educators, Peter Levine and Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg of CIRCLE, recently reported at the 2017 Democracy at a Crossroads National Summit that proven practices such as civics courses, deliberations about current issues, and service learning create “a more prosperous, equitable, responsible, and engaged democratic society” (2017, 6), raise and sustain the rate of
informed voting, reduce disparities in political influence, and make students more employable. But they also assert that schools must adopt a different type of civics for the 21st century—one that prepares students for a world of social media rather than printed newspapers, equips them to deal with a polarized society, and engages a far more diverse generation (Levine and Kawashima-Ginsberg 2017, 10).

Although schools have not routinely taught civics since the 1970s, a burgeoning movement to incorporate such studies into the curriculum is taking shape around the country. This movement opens doors for school librarians to engage students in new and innovative ways, bringing a diversity of future citizens safe (and brave) spaces where they have a voice, listen to each other, and share interests, concerns, and decision-making. If school librarians seize this important moment, they will create new opportunities for teaching the kind of critical thinking skills they have embraced for years. Undoubtedly, school libraries are well positioned to become critical actors in the kind of civic learning promoted by Levine and Kawashima-Ginsberg, just as they have traditionally prepared students to succeed in college and careers. But they must incorporate that 3rd “C”—citizenship, to ensure that tomorrow’s adults take an active role in the collective life of their communities and country, and not just their own individual pursuits. School libraries can make a marked difference in the civic mission of schools by taking the following steps.

**Reimagine Learning Spaces**

School libraries offer spaces, or commons, where students of all backgrounds and views gather not only to study and conduct research, but also to work together to share honestly and listen deeply, especially in the face of so much division. Such welcoming, inclusive, and safe spaces
create the kind of civic place conducive to democratic discourse—safe as well as brave spaces
where students can feel comfortable dealing with pressing public problems. Such “3rd places” are
needed in schools so that students can experience the civic processes of democracy, get to know
each other, learn together, frame issues of common concern, deliberate to solve shared problems,
deepen understanding, and connect across the spectrum of thought. Moreover, spaces—already
embedded in school libraries that are conducive to both inquiry and group interaction reflect and
create community, as well as bring students together through respectful intellectual discourse and
exchange.

Convene Civil Public Forums

Civil deliberative dialogue enables students not only to speak, but also to listen and learn from
each other so they can find common ground, recognize trade-offs, and then act in the best
interests of the whole community. Such forums afford students the opportunity to participate in
c Recordations about “wicked problems”—problems that are difficult or impossible to solve like
poverty, immigration, and global warning. These conversations consider various options for
dealing with issues of common concern, weigh alternatives, consider tradeoffs, resolve
differences and move forward together. Such democratic discourse allows students to practice
important skills of citizenship while engaging with issues with real implications for their
 communities and lives. It also encourages them to take responsibility—to act in a reasoned
manner despite divergent self-interests. Although self-governance and human dignity benefit
when views are authentically expressed, it takes more than diverse voices to make democracy
work. It takes civility—reasoned public discourse where respect, restraint, responsibility,
tolerance, and empathy coexist with free expression—so that fellow students can hear each other. Schools need safe and brave spaces where all are welcome to come together and strike their own balance between the boundaries and norms of civil discourse. Not only do such forums help students analyze information, think critically, and work with others, but also model how to talk and work across divides in the face of deep-seated differences.

Civic engagement proponents like the National Conference on Citizenship, CIRCLE, and the National Council for the Social Studies endorse deliberation as a strategy for K-12 schools. Teachers from State College, PA, to Riverside, CA, now utilize deliberative dialogue in their classrooms. School librarians can participate in these civil dialogues, using skills taught through the American Library Association’s Libraries Transform Communities: Models for Change initiative and the ALA Center for Civic Life webinars. They can also tap trained facilitators often available locally through networks like the National Coalition on Dialogue and Deliberation (NCDD), the National Issues Forums, Everyday Democracy, and Choices—all of which train citizens and lead deliberative forums—conversations that can instill democratic values and inspire a sense of civic agency in young people.

Foster Civic Literacy

Young people must learn a broad range of 21st Century skills if they are to find, evaluate, use, and create information effectively, as well as become responsible citizens. Librarians have long led their schools in teaching the skills necessary for civic participation, which align well with the 2018 AASL Standards Framework for Learners and the Teaching Tolerance Social Justice Standards. Nevertheless, many students still lack the skills to distinguish credible from unreliable sources—particularly online, raising concerns by the Stanford History Education Group that
democracy is threatened by disinformation that spreads and flourishes with ease (Stanford History Education Group 2016).

As they tackle fake news, clicktivism and slacktivism, school librarians are well positioned to seize this teachable moment to enhance civic literacy—“the knowledge and ability of citizens to make sense of their world and to act as competent citizens” (Milner 2002, 3). They can build upon the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies, which affirms that, “Active and responsible citizens are able to identify and analyze public problems, deliberate with other people about how to define and address issues, take constructive action together, reflect on their actions, create and sustain groups, and influence institutions both large and small.” The Framework, which incorporates 4 dimensions that parallel much of the AASL standards and framework for learning, includes: (1) Developing questions and planning inquiries; (2) Applying disciplinary concepts and tools; (3) Evaluating sources and using evidence; and (4) Communicating conclusions and taking informed action. The C3 Framework prepares students to vote, serve on juries, follow the news and current events, and participate in voluntary groups, as well as readies them for college and career. (National Council for Social Studies n.d., 19). Crickett Kidwell, an advocate for the civic mission of schools, considers civic literacy “a direct response against attitudes of alienation and distrust of government, disengagement of youth, and disconnectedness between school, community, and life skills” (2006).

Although librarians share these civic concerns, they need proven models for weaving them into the library curriculum. Sara Jane Levin, librarian at the Urban School in San Francisco, has incorporated civic literacy into her training strategies by collaborating with teachers to help
students develop critical civic “skills that help our citizen students recognize how to enhance service work and become agents of change in a democratic society” (2016, 31).

Build Civic Partnerships

Civic organizations across the country have staked their claim in teaching a new generation the skills needed to participate in a 21st century democracy. If libraries are to fulfill their civic mission in the information age, they must join these organizations in charting active ways to engage young people that encourage their involvement in democratic discourse and community renewal. School librarians are ideally suited to demonstrate that “citizenship is not a spectator sport” (Putnam 2000, 53) by heeding the advise of Kahlenberg and Janey: “The 2016 presidential election should serve as a powerful impetus for action. New policies and investments are needed to ensure that our nation, which has been a shining example of democratic values for the world, can continue to play that role for generations to come” (2016, 29).


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