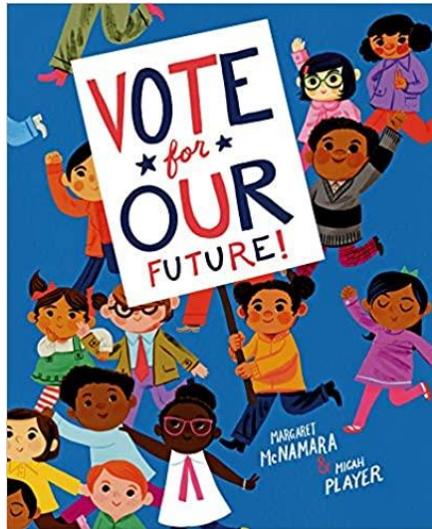


First Opinion: Mobilizing the Vote: Children as Engaged Citizens

McNamara, Margaret. *Vote for Our Future*. Illustrated by Micah Player. New York: Schwartz & Wade Books, 2020. Print.

Haeny Yoon



Nestled in the middle of *Vote for Our Future* is a pertinent insight, “Kids have to live with adult choices” (unpaged). Long after many of us are gone, our children will inherit the fragile economic state, the threats to our environment, the impact of climate change, rising global tensions and the consequences of racial violence.

Like many of us, I have been thinking about the implications of this election cycle for myself, my family but also for our future. Are kids stuck with adults choosing the conditions by which their futures are constructed? Clearly, sometimes, adults are not always the best arbiters of socially just and promising futures. For the sake of their own self-interests, adults cannot always be trusted to “do the right thing” no matter how much we purport to do so. If children do not yet have the right to vote, what can they actually do?

Throughout this book, we encounter young children who mobilize voters through a series of real and authentic action—canvassing neighborhoods, passing out flyers, alerting citizens to

voter registration links and sharing important information about what is at stake. What is compelling is the idea that social change happens through the work of engaged citizens, no matter what their age or size. Although voting is an important part of the democratic process, the book takes up a much lesser explored topic—mobilizing the vote. All of us can take part in that. And as we have seen in many of the grassroots campaigns from 2016, the personal actions of committed citizens who engaged with communities, listened to peoples’ concerns, and educated others on local/national issues and were victorious in their bids for political office. Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez is one of those representatives who relied on adults and children alike to “take to the streets” and advocate for change.

Stanton Elementary School, the fictional school featured in *Vote for Our Future*, like many schools across America will be transformed into polling sites on election day. By proximity, children will see democracy embodied in the form of voting. They will witness the good, the bad and the ugly of electoral politics, invoking both proximal and distal effects. I remember sitting in a 2nd grade classroom the day after the 2016 presidential election with children who were clearly emotionally and physically impacted by the election outcomes. They had fully formed opinions about their elected officials and experienced similar disappointments and fears that are always circulating around communities of Color. Aside from what the election would do to their futures, they were also concerned about its implications for their present. In a current landscape that dehumanizes people of Color, Micah Player takes care to represent the diversity of the voting body. Their presence across these pages reminds us that the political actions of people of Color have had significant impacts on social change from voting rights to health care and educational equity. While high-visibility contests (e.g. presidential elections) are made to seem more valuable given press coverage, the end of this book explains how voting brought about important legislation and social change: establishment of the post office, the Civil Rights Act, and most recently, the Affordable Care Act. Voting, as a civil right, gets passed over every day because of excuses that adults might make and are represented throughout the book: too busy, not registered, it’s a pain, lines are too long, or it’s not a big deal. Page after page in this book, and I presume by no accident, children are the ones reminding adults that every vote counts.

I am struck by the illustration at the end of the book depicting Stanton Elementary the day after the elections. It “went back to being a school” where democracy and the role of

government is discussed, and the next Black leader is already starting her Senate campaign for a better tomorrow. It reminds us that the purpose of schooling is to cultivate an active citizenry who upon examining society cannot help but to change it. We need more books where children are not just holding a fictitious election in preparation for their futures. We need books that show children in the present, as fully engaged citizens whose voice matters right now.

Works Cited

McNamara, Margaret. *Vote for Our Future*. Illustrated by Micah Player. New York: Schwartz & Wade Books, 2020. Print.

About the Author

Haeny Yoon is a former elementary school teacher whose students taught her that children are political, intellectual, and cultural beings who deserve to be heard. She is now an Associate Professor at Teachers College, Columbia University, in the Department of Curriculum and Teaching. Her scholarship elevates the lived experiences of young children who always seem to have something important to say about the world around them. Both her parents are retired from the United States Postal Service and she plans to vote early in 2020. She will wear one of her dad's old postal uniforms proudly.