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Teaching, Enacting, and Sustaining Hope in the Shadow of COVID-19

Sarah M. Stitzlein

Article abstract

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Cite this article

Teaching, Enacting, and Sustaining Hope in the Shadow of COVID-19

SARAH M. STITZLEIN
University of Cincinnati

This article extends initial ideas on what hope is, why it matters to democracy, and how to teach it in schools, which were first presented by Sarah M. Stitzlein in her book Learning How to Hope: Reviving Democracy through Our Schools and Civil Society *(Oxford University Press, 2020). It accounts for recent obstacles to hope, especially the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. It suggests ways that other philosophers of education might further pursue describing and cultivating hope in light of recent social, political, economic, and health obstacles due to the pandemic. It emphasizes the role of inquiry and problem-solving using pragmatist philosophical approaches.*

At nearly the same time that COVID-19 first appeared, I published a book entitled *Learning How to Hope* (2020). In those pages, I described what hope was, why it mattered to democracy, and how we might teach hope in US schools. Within a couple of months, most US schools closed their doors. Many teachers and parents became more focused on what might have been called *hoping to learn* as they tried to figure out how to educate students remotely. A year later, the superintendent of my local school district sent out an email to teachers, urging them to look for hope, while noting that, for her, hope was "on my mind and in my heart." Over the course of COVID-19, many Americans hitched their hopes to leaders who claimed to have plans for addressing the pandemic, such as President Trump and Dr. Anthony Fauci. Increasingly, their plans came to be viewed as politically opposed. Aligning with one or the other by virtue of what one did or didn't do, such as following the CDC's recommendation to wear a mask, indicated much more than just a response to the pandemic: it also signified one's position in a particular camp. For some citizens, leaders like these became messianic figures – saviours celebrated in memes and commemorated with bobbleheads. Many citizens placed their hopes in those leaders rather passively, sitting back and trusting them to solve the problem. Other citizens responded more actively, taking actions aligned with the plans of those leaders, such as getting vaccinated. Still others were ushered into the fray by the nature of their work, including healthcare professionals.

A central point in my book that has been further affirmed during COVID-19 is that hope is not something that we find, hold, or contain. Contrary to the assertion of the superintendent, it is not in our hearts, nor is it in our leaders. Hope is something that we sometimes do individually and often do collectively; it entails action, agency, and taking responsibility. Here, I aim to advance this action-oriented view of hope as I reflect on my initial discussion of it, note challenges posed to it by the pandemic, and describe how philosophers of education and others might move forward with hope in teaching, scholarship, and everyday life.

An Initial Account of Hope

In my book, I respond to problematic notions of hope as an individualist emotional outlook or a passive faith placed in others. I employ pragmatist philosophy to develop an account of hope that is social and political. Beginning with John Dewey's (1922/1983) discussion of "indeterminate situations," I note how

hope often arises within the midst of despair. There, we must turn to inquiry to help us explore our problematic circumstances, then propose and test possible solutions so we can move forward from them. These solutions entail formulating what Dewey calls "ends-in-view" that provide us relatively close and feasible goals that help us move out of despair.

My book upholds the pragmatist belief in meliorism, which claims that there is significant evidence in history to show that we can make things better through our effort and work together. Meliorism, then, is a call to action, even in the midst of hardship. Such action is often tied to that of others who are working together to solve shared problems. Hope is an inclination to act and is best used as a verb – hoping, an ongoing activity. Hoping with others, we engage our imagination and inquiry to improve our situation. I put forward the idea that hope is best understood as a set of habits – a disposition toward possibility and change for the betterment of oneself and, often, others.

I conclude the book by describing how hope might help us address some of the current struggles in democracy, such as overcoming partisan divisiveness, by goading collective problem-solving that requires interacting across party lines. Furthermore, I described how hope, as habits, can be cultivated in schools and civil society. Such development is facilitated by communities of inquiry that nurture communication, imagination, and storytelling, while viewing citizenship as a shared fate.

The Impact of COVID-19 on Hope

The original and overarching aim of my book was to improve democracy. So, I wrote about hope in terms of political life, pushing aside aspects of despair that might be seen as more personal, such as rising rates of opioid addiction and suicide, which were prevalent while I was writing in 2019. COVID-19, however, has forced me to see the faults and shortcomings of that approach. Social, political, and economic conditions cannot be divorced from personal despair over loss of freedom, health, and life. Our political lives are deeply shaped by our personal experiences of hopelessness and how hopelessness plays out in society. Empirical studies of well-being during COVID-19 confirm these connections, expose increases in experiences of despair, and reveal the potential relief provided by hope in America and abroad (Gallagher, et al., 2021; Yildirim & Gokmen, 2020).

One indicator that we are "stuck" in despair, as Dewey might say, is our inability to effectively solve shared problems or find better ways of living together. Of course, COVID-19 pushed us to take up the fundamental civic question of "What should we do?" in a pressing and weighty way, as millions of lives were on the line. Yet, even with such high stakes, we found ourselves floundering to agree on solutions and paths forward regarding lockdowns, mask mandates, and vaccinations. We were increasingly paralyzed on other fronts too, including deciding what to do about police brutality, hate groups, global warming, unaccompanied children at our borders, and more. Many of these issues revealed the depth of partisan divides and just how hard it may be to work across them.

Despair grew. When we are in despair, we not only aren't sure how to move forward or how to act with agency toward a specific goal; we also tend to feel disconnected from other people. This is significant because it is often our interactions with other people, especially within civil society, that help us shape our goals and develop means for fulfilling them. During COVID-19, we have not just *felt* isolated, we have *been* isolated. In public places we instituted separation and we erected walls between us in the name of safety. Some cordoned themselves off in their homes. Many of the places where we gather to discuss and solve shared problems are public spaces – civic organizations, schools, university forums, and even parks. Yet, these were the very sort of places that were closed in the name of safety, thereby limiting opportunity for hoping with others, and exacerbating experiences of isolation. We were cut off from each other and from the tools that we needed to engage in inquiry well. We were blocked from building the solidarity that is often needed to tackle our shared problems. As a result, we have struggled to determine what we ought to hope for (Complete eradication of the virus? Reduced suffering of the sick?) and how we might enact hope together (physically supporting each other with hugs, metaphorically putting our heads together to talk through solutions).

Even as I now recognize the need to better attend to experiences of personal hopelessness, trauma, and suffering, I maintain that hope should not merely be about our personal well-being, though that certainly plays a role in hoping. Instead, hope should primarily concern the public good. One of my greatest disappointments during the pandemic has been witnessing citizens put their personal desire (such as not wearing masks because of the minor inconveniences they cause) over the well-being of others. Even public leaders, like Ted Cruz, prioritized their personal happiness by fleeing suffering communities for sunny vacations elsewhere. When we focus primarily or only on our personal desires, we not only lose sight of public goods, we are also led astray from collective avenues for fulfilling them. When we, as citizens, become isolated competitors focused on our own narrow interests and those of our immediate families, we lose the ability to detect social problems, the empathy needed to understand how others are impacted by them, and the motivation to take action to ameliorate them.

In some cases, the problem is not merely self-serving individualism. Part of the problem in America has been that many citizens have had little personal interaction with those who face higher risk or have suffered significant loss of life or economic stability due to COVID-19. As a result, those citizens don't fully appreciate the plight of others. For example, many of the most vocal critics of state mask mandates live in rural areas, where they have little experience, for example, with crowded urban public transportation or understand how masks might be warranted there. They narrowly interpreted the mandates, then, in terms of restrictions on personal liberty rather than in terms of ensuring greater safety for the community as a whole *and* them as individuals.

The pandemic also magnifies aspects of differences in personal and political hope. It has simply been harder for some people to enact hope than others, especially if they suffered from COVID-19 infection or lost loved ones to it (including 175,000 American children who have lost a parent or primary caregiver). There are also those whose lives were further strained because of economic impacts that resulted in job loss or increased expenses, more time spent caring for children forced into remote schooling, losing out on religious fulfillment due to closed worship facilities, being confined to nursing facilities with little interaction with others, and more. Notably, infection rates and impacts have not been born equitably by all, nor are all citizens in equal positions when it comes to the time, energy, or resources needed to hope. We know that older people have endured higher rates of infection and mortality, and that people of colour and those with fewer economic resources have struggled more than their White and wealthier counterparts. This exacerbates the impact of structural racism and prolonged experiences of inequity and hardship that already produce neurochemicals that prevent people from feeling positive (Groopman, 2004).

Moving Forward

So, where do we go from here when it comes to teaching, enacting, and sustaining hope? One of the key ways we move forward from despair is by tapping into our imaginations to tell stories of how life can be better. Philosopher Judith Green (2008) explains, "storytelling is a process of moving from fear and loss to vision and hope" (p. 23). Stories give us accounts of how problems can be solved and can motivate us to go from being passive observers to being active participants by showing us examples of how to take action and what impact such action may have. What Cheshire Calhoun (2013) dubs a "hope narrative" can sustain and unite by depicting the objects and objectives of hoping, which can serve to rally our action, nurture a shared identity, and build collective resolve. Telling stories can help us feel heard and valued by others, a significant outcome in a society where many feel isolated or left behind (Hochschild, 2018). But even while geared toward a better future, those stories must face past and present struggles. We need to devote time to attend to the suffering experienced due to COVID-19.

Educators can facilitate the telling and sharing of stories that process trauma and help citizens imagine what their future lives will or can be like. Philosophers of education can offer both ideal and non-ideal theories to guide policies and practices in schools as a response to lessons learned from the pandemic. Stories can also be used educatively, in which teachers guide students in analyzing their own differing struggles, power dynamics, and visions for the future. Students can discuss the feasibility of

predictions and desirability of futures they envision, while assessing the resources needed to bring them to life and building coalitions around such shared work.

The stories we tell should also accentuate the positive results of COVID-19. For example, some children developed new skills as independent learners, while some parents became more engaged with student learning, and public opinion of teachers grew as more citizens realized their value and the difficulty of their jobs. The pandemic also revealed the need to harness multiple community resources, working together as allies to support student learning. These supports may change in the years to come, but we can build from a new appreciation for how good schooling involves many members of a community, from parents to corporate donors to tech companies.

The pandemic has also revealed just how interconnected our world is, a message that is especially important for US citizens to confront in light of their long history of celebrating individualism and the recent political platform of "America First." Therefore, the stories should not stop at US borders, nor should they be simplistic celebrations of the pharmaceutical success of US vaccines, or lay blame for how the virus was handled in various other countries and especially in China (Green, 2008). While I argue in my book that pragmatist hope is well-aligned with the American spirit, if such a thing exists, it should not be limited to visions of American exceptionalism, a potential criticism of my account anticipated by Clarence Joldersma (2021). Instead, our stories should tell of a world with greater interaction, shared work, and mutual responsibility for overcoming problems.

In classrooms, students need to learn how to build hope together, but they also need teachers who will give them pause and challenge their efforts and their objects of hope. Gert Biesta (2006) describes this well when he says:

> teachers who wish to bring hope to the classroom have a task, not only in supporting their students' hopes, but also in questioning and interrupting them. Of the task of helping their students evaluate their hopes, the most important dimension is not to establish whether their hopes are realistic or not, but to find out to what extent their hopes are "compatible" with the hopes of others. This is a question about ethics and politics, that is, about the role of our hopes in our public lives, the lives we live with others. (pp. 281–282)

Teachers' questions can guide students toward seeing how achieving their hopes depends upon the actions of and interactions with other people. In addition, these discussions will help to emphasize the social and political nature of hoping and the common good.

Importantly, however, these discussions require initial efforts to help students better hear and understand others. This may require foundational work in the skills of listening, empathy, and civility (Stitzlein, 2021). If we are going to address deep-rooted suffering and related systems of oppression, like racism, we have to develop not only skills of communication and dialogue, but also relationship-building and attachment to others. These must extend beyond our classrooms into civic organizations, public protests, and other sites. I am reminded of neopragmatist Richard Rorty (1982), who claimed that pragmatist hope entails a "vital sense of human solidarity" (p. 208). Philosophers of education could contribute to further thinking on the role of solidarity and how it relates to the experience of shared fate that was magnified by the reach of the pandemic (Ben-Porath 2013; Lin & Jackson, 2019).

Grit, a future-driven and resiliency-based cousin of hope, has recently been celebrated in schools as a way to enhance student success. But, as I explain in my book, grit falls far short of the aims and approach of hope. Philosophers and researchers of education should expose how grit romanticizes suffering as a source for success and focuses too far into the future, making us inattentive to the injustices, atrocities, and resources in our lives today. As Derek Gottlieb (2021) explains, hope "emerges from *trying*, with only partial success, to live out a certain way of being. Failures, here, throw one's purposes and practices into relief" (p. 41). Perhaps one of the most educative things we can do now is to learn from our failures during the pandemic, including lockdown and reopening procedures that put some citizens more at risk than others, and the mechanisms that allowed citizens to be swept up in assurances from President Trump that the virus would pass quickly with few losses. Those assurances embody the sort of

passive optimism, believing things will necessarily get better, which differs from the more genuine and active sense of hope that I describe in my book.

Even for all that hope can do to sustain us and improve our lives, we must be attuned to its potential shortcomings. For some people, hoping may be an overly indulgent luxury, demanding time, resources, and reflection that are beyond their means. The pandemic exacerbated pervasive patterns of disadvantage, which make the work of hope unequally feasible. Indeed, for some people or in some situations it may be unfair or even harmful to urge hopefulness (Warren, 2015; Sullivan, 2017). Moreover, as Winston Thompson (2021) warns, we must be careful that hope is not used as a political distraction, a way to nefariously subdue citizens, obscuring their ability to detect and or speak out against current injustices. We must teach hope in a way that enables a more bifocal vision that moves between different points of focus in the present and future, seeing each in light of the other, and being on guard for blind spots and blinders, as well as their causes. Oded Zipory (2020) captures that bifocal vision well when he describes Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech as directed toward an improved future, while also attuned to the "fierce urgency of now" as he revealed contemporary racial and economic injustices.

Finally, philosophers of education should continue to connect hoping with democratic identity and citizenship development. Hope understood as habits provides a structural way of living and putting forward effort that not only is more sustainable than privatized grit or simple optimism, but is also overtly public and can be cultivated in schools charged with creating and sustaining the public. There, we can foreground the nurturing of democratic understandings of the self, helping students to see how their personal, social, and economic struggles relate to their political lives, each of which can be bolstered by hoping.

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About the Author

Sarah M. Stitzlein is Professor of Education and Affiliate Professor of Philosophy at the University of Cincinnati. She is a philosopher of education interested in issues of educational equity, political philosophy, citizenship education, and the relationship between democracy and education.