

Building and Sustaining Hope

A Response to: “Meaningful Hope for Teachers in a Time of High Anxiety and Low Morale”

Kathy Hytten

ABSTRACT

In this essay, I respond to Carrie Nolan and Sarah M. Stitzlein’s article “Meaningful Hope for Teachers in a Time of High Anxiety and Low Morale” and support their argument for meaningful hope grounded in pragmatist philosophy. I agree that while hope is routinely called for in the educational literature, it is often done so in superficial and vacuous ways. Moreover, hope is often conflated with wishful thinking or naive optimism. A pragmatist vision of hope is different. It is a hope that compels us to act thoughtfully and creatively in the present so as to open up yet unimagined possibilities for the future—a hope that is generative, resourceful, engaged, and communal. To complement Nolan and Stitzlein’s vision, I argue that pragmatist hope also requires of us habits of community building and social and political activism to challenge unjust systems. Only when we act on both individual and systemic levels can we sustain the kind of pragmatist hope that is so necessary in schools.

Hope just means another world might be possible, not promised, not guaranteed. Hope calls for action; action is impossible without hope. (Solnit, 2006, p. 5)

THERE IS NO doubt that teachers in our current era face a challenging climate. Resources are limited, pressures are high, rewards are ephemeral, students are distracted, and public scrutiny is excessive. Operating under the weight of high-stakes accountability schemes, teachers are judged on the basis of superficial measures of achievement (i.e., test scores) rather than lauded for cultivating meaningful learning. They are also often blamed for failure, even as they are asked to do what sometimes feels like the impossible: teach kids who lack the basic necessities in life, including adequate food, health care, housing, and supportive social networks. Cheating is rampant and cynicism about the entire educational system abounds. These challenges also affect those of us in higher education, where too many students seem to be more interested in credentials than in academic engagement, and at the same time exhibit an uncanny sense of entitlement when it comes to getting good grades. Faculty members are increasingly asked to do more with less: to teach more students and classes, to publish more, to get more grants, and to serve on more committees, all the while the numbers of tenure and

tenure-track faculty are dwindling right alongside the resources needed to support them. It can certainly be difficult to maintain hope under such conditions. It is even more difficult when even hope itself seems like an empty promise, sustained only by naive optimism and wishful thinking. Yet without hope, we virtually ensure that our educational efforts will be futile. Indeed, what we most need in these challenging times is meaningful hope—hope grounded in both habits of action and conscious shifts in thinking. It is a hope that compels us to act thoughtfully and creatively in the present so as to open up yet unimagined possibilities for the future—a hope that is generative, resourceful, engaged, and communal. In short, it is hope born of pragmatism.

In their essay “Meaningful Hope for Teachers in Times of High Anxiety and Low Morale,” Carrie Nolan and Sarah Stitzlein (2011) offer a rich vision of precisely the kind of hope that we need to combat the challenging educational realities that we work amid.

KATHY HYTTE is a professor in the department of Educational Administration and Higher Education at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale. She is a past president of the American Educational Studies Association and has served on the executive boards of the John Dewey Society and the Philosophy of Education Society, where she also served a three-year term as executive director.

Nolan and Stitzlein do a great job of differentiating hope from vacuous idealism, while at the same time crafting a powerful, philosophically grounded portrait of hope as an active force that can propel us forward even in the face of uncertainty. There is much that I am drawn to in their vision of pragmatist hope. For example, I love the ways they locate hope within struggle and characterize it in terms of habits of thought and action. Their image of pragmatist-inspired hope is persuasive and nicely articulated, particularly the ways they name imagination, reflection, collaboration, and contextualization as central to hope. I think they are right to suggest that we need more than slogans of hope; rather, we need hope that is infused in particular educational actions and practices. Habits involve predispositions to view the world, and to engage it, in certain ways. The habits that mark a pragmatist sense of hope include persistence, creativity, resourcefulness, courage, flexibility, attentiveness, patience, openness, discernment, experimentalism, imagination, reflection, gratitude, and commitment. In terms of educational practices, Nolan and Stitzlein suggest that we develop meaningful ends-in-view for classroom activities, as opposed to distant, abstract, and seemingly unachievable ideals; employ thoughtful logic to confront our daily problems; dialogue with, and mentor, each other; engage in community-based learning projects; eliminate educational practices that contribute to excessive competition in schools; and practice seeking and uncovering the good in all of our efforts and activities.

There is no doubt that the grounding of hope in pragmatist thought and action is an important palliative to the all-too-often empty and uninspiring calls for hope in educational literature. In addition to their thoughtful drawing on pragmatist theory, I also admire the ways in which Nolan and Stitzlein consistently practice pragmatism in their crafting of their overall argument. That is, they identify problems with the discourse surrounding hope, provide the context for why these problems ought to concern us, explore different ways of understanding hope, consider options for what it might mean to be hopeful in particular educational settings, and offer generative possibilities for pedagogical practice. As they suggest, one of the most compelling aspects of pragmatist hope is the experientially grounded belief that through reflective thought and experimentation, we can distinguish between worse and better values, choices, policies, and practices. Judith Green argues that this capacity to identify and act on the better is a hallmark feature of pragmatism. She writes that the pragmatists' "existential commitment and advice was to always choose and act for 'the better' in a particular context, based on a reasonable interpretation of the evidence available to us at the time, even if 'the best' is unclear or apparently unachievable" (2008, p. 245). Meaningful hope is sustained by the fact that by paying attention to, and learning from, the actions we take to address present educational challenges, "we can more effectively recognize and achieve 'the better' on future occasions" (p. 245).

One of the strengths of Nolan and Stitzlein's essay lies in the way they weave together theory and practice. They provide a number of specific examples of how teachers can build and sustain hope in the classroom. For instance, they suggest experimenting with different programs when confronting classroom challenges,

such as peer tutoring as a way of helping struggling readers in an already overcrowded classroom, and a social contract created by students and teachers to cultivate shared responsibility for classroom community. They describe a project connecting students to the local community as a way to enhance problem-solving abilities, develop habits of citizenship, and garner parental support. To teachers, they suggest keeping a gratitude journal and always remembering to confirm students before disciplining them, attributing to them the best possible motivations for their actions. Certainly these types of activities are better than much of what goes on in contemporary classrooms, especially at helping teachers believe their choices and actions indeed make a difference in student experiences and potential for achievement. While valuable, the bulk of the examples that Nolan and Stitzlein provide are at the individual level: what teachers can do in their own classrooms to construct, sustain, and enable hope. I cannot help but wonder if this focus might be insufficient to generate the kind of meaningful hope that they envision. Individual actions and changes require systems, structures, and communities of support, something that Nolan and Stitzlein allude to but don't address enough in their nonetheless provocative essay.

I know a number of teachers who have experimented with the kinds of pedagogical practices these authors suggest, creating engaging projects for students, involving them in decision making, and providing opportunities for genuine problem solving. And yet they haven't typically left these activities feeling hopeful; instead, they felt burned out, unsupported, frustrated, fatalistic, and in the worst case, subjected to the scorn and resentment of colleagues. It often seems that school systems conspire against teachers who attempt to meaningfully connect with students, to teach them more than simply the rote information they need to succeed on tests. Teachers who attempt to use critical methods in classrooms often don't last long in our public schools, leaving to spare themselves more "ongoing demoralizing emotional fatigue" (Carrillo, 2010, p. 74). Critical, engaged teachers can feel isolated, overwhelmed, and betrayed, especially when they lack like-minded colleagues and work under short-sighted, instrumentally-rational administrators. Even the most hopeful teachers are often crushed by systems that reward mediocrity and compliance. Sadly, as Carrillo suggests, "many of our public schools are ideologically run by the 'common sense' of the worst in the profession. Instead of reimagining what should count as education, many certified 'master' teachers use 'best practices' to reproduce the status quo" (2010, p. 76). In such conditions, where morale is low, anxiety is high, budgets are insufficient, and the life prospects for students in the community are grim, we need much more than individual teachers who are hopeful to change the course of our educational future. Or, at the very least, we need a critical mass of such teachers who, through their collaborative actions, can begin to shift our educational priorities, values, and practices, and consequently create a more hopeful and supportive climate in schools.

To be fair, Nolan and Stitzlein do recognize the importance of supportive connections and, indeed, call for communities of inquiry in schools. They suggest that within mutually encouraging relationships, hope is generative, and as such, communities of

teachers working together to address school problems are integral to sustaining hope. They also acknowledge that existing educational systems and structures often discourage community, offering the divisiveness of merit pay as one example of a practice that can compromise efforts to build community. Yet I was hoping for a little more attention to the importance of community building as a habit of hopefulness, as illustrated briefly in the Briercrest College example. I also would have liked some discussion of the need for structural, political efforts to change educational policies and practices that systematically fail our most marginalized students and that cause some of our best and brightest teachers to leave the profession altogether. Addressing these two issues would be a useful complement to the otherwise quite important groundwork that Nolan and Stitzlein lay in constructing a pragmatist vision of hope.

In several places in their essay, Nolan and Stitzlein touch on the centrality of community to cultivating and sustaining hope. For example, they argue that teachers should learn to feed off of each other's successes and to collaborate to work on issues. In practice, these collaborative efforts are usually easier called for than enacted. This is especially the case when structures that would help facilitate collaboration, such as common planning time or support for team-teaching, are not created and/or valued within schools. I think one of the most important preconditions for sustaining hope is surrounding oneself, to the extent possible, with like-minded colleagues, that is, people who fuel our efforts rather than diminish or derail them. Doing so requires visionary leadership coupled with active and systematic efforts at community building. It requires that we create spaces for dialogue, that we seek out opportunities to collaborate, that we continually reinvigorate the groups we are part of, and that we regularly expand our connections to others. Community building requires a disposition to see the best in others and to see our individual successes intimately connected to the successes of our colleagues. In describing how we can develop flourishing academic departments, Donald Hall (2007) argues that we always bear responsibility for not just our own work but the work of the communities to which we belong. It is up to each of us to actively and consciously create the kinds of "diverse nexuses of shared interest and conversational energy" (p. 90) that are mutually enriching and soul-feeding, as opposed to the all-too-common soul-crushing experiences of many critically engaged teachers.

While habitually working to build community, we also need to engage in political action to change demoralizing and debilitating educational structures. If teachers are judged solely on the test scores their students achieve, they will be disinclined, if not actively discouraged, from creating the kinds of interactive and project-based learning experiences for their students that lead to a love for learning and sustain hopefulness. Here I am reminded of Lisa Delpit's (2006) suspicion of an educational-and-social change strategy that relies on teachers changing the world one classroom at a time. She argues instead that we must work to change the education system at "as many gatekeeping points as possible,"

maintaining that "if we are truly to effect societal change, we cannot do so from the bottom up, but we must push and agitate from the top down" (p. 40). I have no doubt that Nolan and Stitzlein, as good pragmatists, recognize this kind of political work on systems and structures as an important complement to individual efforts.

Indeed, our individual actions are always connected to larger systems. Allen Johnson (2006) makes this point nicely, suggesting that "when you openly change how you participate in a system, you do more than change your own behavior; you also change how the system happens" (p. 143). At the same time, I think it is important to acknowledge the very real structural constraints that even the most hopeful teachers confront, if only to remind us that as educators, we need to work at many levels at once: in our individual classrooms; with our departmental colleagues; with administrators and school board members; with parents and community members; and with local, state, and federal policymakers.

Despite only limited attention to habits of community building and political activism, Nolan and Stitzlein nonetheless offer something quite powerful: a workable, sophisticated, useable, and practically grounded vision of hope in action. This is a vision of hope as a way of living, an ongoing practice, a struggle; hope as a verb, not a noun. It is hope deeply connected to action and intrinsic to how we story our actions, to the narratives we share with others. Solnit (2006) reminds us that "nobody can know the full consequences of their actions, and history is full of small acts that changed the world in surprising ways" (p. 66). Pragmatist habits of hopefulness can help us to see the ways that even these small acts—for example, how we treat our students and structure our classrooms—do make a difference, especially in opening up possibilities that can diminish anxiety, enhance morale, enable achievement, build community, and alter problematic educational realities. In the end, the only way in which positive change occurs is if we each participate thoughtfully and consciously in making it happen, precisely what is involved in a pragmatist philosophy of hope.

References

- Carrillo, J. F. (2010). Teaching that breaks your heart: Reflections on the soul wounds of a first-year Latina teacher. *Harvard Educational Review, 80*(1), 74–80.
- Delpit, L. (2006). *Other people's children: Cultural conflicts in the classroom*. New York: The New Press.
- Green, J. M. (2008). *Pragmatism and social hope: Deepening democracy in global contexts*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Hall, D. E. (2007). *The academic community: A manual for change*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.
- Nolan, C., & Stitzlein, S. M. (2011). Meaningful hope for teachers in times of high anxiety and low morale. *Democracy & Education 19*(1). Retrieved from <http://democracyeducationjournal.org/home>
- Johnson, A. G. (2006). *Privilege, power, and difference* (2nd ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Solnit, R. (2006). *Hope in the dark: Untold histories, wild possibilities*. New York: Nation Books.