

Learning How to Hope: Reviving Democracy through Our Schools and Civil Society by Sarah M. Stitzlein. Oxford University Press, 2020

Kathy Hytten

Volume 27, numéro 2, 2020

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1074051ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1074051ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Philosophy of Education Society

ISSN

2369-8659 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Hytten, K. (2020). Compte rendu de [*Learning How to Hope: Reviving Democracy through Our Schools and Civil Society* by Sarah M. Stitzlein. Oxford University Press, 2020]. *Philosophical Inquiry in Education*, 27(2), 207–210. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1074051ar>

Review of

Learning How to Hope: Reviving Democracy through Our Schools and Civil Society

By Sarah M. Stitzlein. Oxford University Press, 2020

KATHY HYTTEN

University of North Carolina Greensboro

In the past few months, people around the world have been reckoning with the enduring legacies of racism, white supremacy, and systematic abuses of power, while also battling a global health pandemic that has claimed the lives of over a million people. In the United States, an average of around 1000 citizens a day are dying from Covid-19, yet our president proclaims, in Orwellian doublespeak, that we have done an amazing job containing the virus in this country, and that he deserves an A+ for his leadership (Cillizza, 2020). Similarly, even as there are ongoing protests for racial justice in almost all major cities around the country, precipitated in part by high-profile and seemingly never-ending cases of police brutality against African Americans, the president proclaims that “nobody has ever done more for the black community” than he has (Qui, 2020). Political polarization is rampant around the world, while historic democracies like the United States seem to be descending into authoritarian rule, if not fascism. One thing we most certainly need in such uncertain and frightening times is hope. We need hope that things can be different, that our daily actions matter to reviving (or finally creating) democracy, and that ordinary citizens can craft a future that is marked by justice, equity, inclusion, compassion, and a sense of shared fate. In short, hope is a critical element to building a democratic future that better approximates our most idealistic dreams and visions.

It is in the light of this troubling climate that I engaged Sarah Stitzlein’s latest book, *Learning How to Hope*. In this book, Stitzlein issues a “call to hope” (p. 137), arguing that hope is “not a particular program of political action, but a way of life” (p. 17) that is crucial to supporting and revitalizing democracy. She begins by describing why we need an activist sense of hope. This is hope as a verb: an “ongoing activity we do often, with or alongside others” (p. 44) in order our transform our current world. The barriers and challenges to hope are numerous, as Stitzlein thoughtfully outlines in her first chapter: pervasive cynicism, despair, and even fatalism; hyper polarization and partisanship; structural violence and inequality; rampant distrust; neoliberal ideologies that position citizens as competitors in a zero-sum game for individual rewards; and refusal to compromise or work collaboratively across lines of difference. “Speaking to concerned and struggling citizens on both sides of the aisle, as well as educators working to develop good citizens,” Stitzlein offers a “philosophically grounded yet accessible insight into our current state of affairs and suggestions for improvement” (p. 17). She proposes that cultivating hope—in schools and civic society—is essential to transforming society and breathing new life into democracy.

Stitzlein's argument for a pragmatist approach to hope is compelling and well-developed. She has gift for writing in clear and accessible ways that can draw in educational practitioners new to pragmatist thought, and, at the same time, deepen the thinking of philosophers, especially through her use of timely examples that illuminate the practical relevance of sometimes abstract ideas. Stitzlein begins in the first chapter by describing what hope is and is not, distinguishing it from problematic and limited understandings of hope, such as those connected to religious traditions, positive psychology, and optimistic but passive forms of wishful thinking. She then introduces her readers to pragmatism, describing how and why she grounds hope in this philosophical tradition. Pragmatism and hope go hand in hand. At the heart of pragmatist philosophy is inquiry and experimentation aimed at addressing and transforming problematic situations in everyday life. She describes a pragmatist sense of hope as "an active orientation toward identifying feasible goals, constructing a narrative for why they are valuable, justifying how one will continue to pursue them in the face of obstacles, and actively chasing them" (p. 22).

After introducing her argument for pragmatist hope and why it is needed in the first chapter, Stitzlein builds a pragmatist account of hope in the ensuing two chapters. In Chapter 2, "Looking Back to Move Forward," she describes and unpacks four key elements to pragmatist hope: inquiry, growth, truth, and meliorism. She dedicates Chapter 3, "Hope as Habits," to a fifth key element, habits. Her discussion of habits is one of the most important contributions of the book, and the groundwork for the argument she makes in Chapter 4, "Hope and Democracy," about the integral and reciprocal relationship between these ideas. Simply put, she maintains that "valuing and nurturing hope may be one important way to sustain and strengthen our democracy today" (p. 60). Stitzlein describes habits as learned and flexible behaviors: "they are ways we greet the world and are disposed toward action in it" (p. 42). They are learned and can also be unlearned; consequently, we can always develop more democratic habits. Moreover, "when habits are tied to intelligent reflection and inquiry, they are projective and sites of agency" (p. 42).

In the final two chapters, Stitzlein shifts her tone a bit and addresses her arguments more to a practitioner and educator audience. In Chapter 5, "Teaching Hope, Not Grit," she focuses on citizenship education, lamenting the lack of attention to civics in most schools and troubling what often appears in its place: a call for grit. Her critiques of the increasingly popular idea of grit, particularly as a habit we ingrain in students in schools, are persuasive. While she sees value in hard work and perseverance, too often grit is about doing what one is told and not challenging inequitable conditions, which she says can exacerbate political despair as "it leaves systems of injustice in place" (p. 83). Calls for grit also romanticize struggle, too often locate failure in the character of children while ignoring systemic and structural inequities, and tend to lead to self-centered and individualist goal-setting and narrowly-focused striving. That is, grit is about individuals working hard to overcome circumstances and achieve personal goals, not about developing a communal sensibility or the sense of shared fate needed to transform the world. She suggests the better alternative to teaching grit is teaching habits of democracy. Holding these habits is essential to sustaining and revitalizing democratic practices and institutions, especially because "we don't just tangentially influence public institutions, we compose them and shape them through our habits of daily life in democracy" (p. 100).

In the final chapter of the book, "Learning How to Hope," Stitzlein describes how we can teach habits of hope in schools. Learning and enacting these habits is the crux of revitalizing democracy. Throughout the book, she consistently maintains that hope "is a way of life that grows out of our

interactions with others and is facilitated by our habits” and that “habits can be taught and nurtured; they can be revised and improved” (p. 38). Chapter 6 is her most practical and practitioner-oriented chapter. Here she describes some specific habits schools ought to teach so that students, as democratic citizens in the making, can be conditioned to hoping in socially transformative ways. Specifically, we learn how to hope in schools by developing communities of inquiry, nurturing communication and deliberation, fostering criticality and dissent, cultivating imagination and storytelling, viewing citizenship as shared fate, and building trust. Stitzlein identifies practices and pedagogical strategies that can help develop each of these habits. These include project-based and service learning, discussion and deliberation in classrooms, activities that require students to understand the perspectives and rationales of all stakeholders, readings that help develop imagination and empathy, teachers modeling inquiry, and students working across lines of difference to build trust. She also provides examples of developing these habits through civic associations beyond schools, encouraging citizens to volunteer and join clubs and organizations around areas of interest. Most of these suggestions are familiar; they are the substance of the progressive vision for education that Dewey advocated for, and that democratic educators have been arguing for ever since. However, there is value to bringing them together in the way Stitzlein does, showing them as part of a coordinated set of practices whose import is most seen and felt in the habits of inquiry, community building, and trust that they support.

Overall, there is much I appreciate about *Learning How to Hope*. Stitzlein makes pragmatist philosophy accessible to broad audiences and consistently shows how democracy, hope, education, and social betterment are intimately related. Ideally, “teaching hope cultivates habits, nurturing proclivities to undertake effort to improve one’s life and the lives of others” (p. 136). This book is a great resource for anyone who wants to make our schools more democratic and more responsive to our social world. Stitzlein’s discussion of the importance of habits is particularly strong. This is especially true in a context where the discourse surrounding education is too often about standards and measurable achievement, and not enough about dispositions toward learning and citizenship. We ought to be less concerned about how much people know and more focused on the kinds of people they are becoming. It is through developing different habits toward problems, the world, and engagement with each other that we have the best chance of speaking back to the challenges of our times, which are many. We also need different habits to create a more democratic future, including engaging respectfully and openly with those don’t share our worldviews.

Yet while I deeply value Stitzlein’s argument that we need to better learn and teach how to hope, I can’t help but wonder if she goes far enough. A democratic sense of hope is surely necessary to transforming social injustice, but is it sufficient? Given the gravity of the challenges ahead, I wonder if we need something more than, or at least as an important complement to, pragmatist hope. While Stitzlein acknowledges the limitations to her arguments, and maintains that pragmatist hope is experimental and always subject to tests of whether it actually works in practice, I am not sure if her account of what is needed to change the world will inspire the kinds of actions that she imagines.

Stitzlein’s call for hope is careful, reasoned, scholarly, and invitational. She wants to build bridges between those on the left and right, and she works hard to offer a non-partisan vision of hope. Yet in so doing, what sometimes gets muted is the deep passion for social justice that she has expressed consistently in her published works, alongside a sense of moral outrage over the anti-democratic realities in our world, including our descent into authoritarian populism. To be sure, Stitzlein acknowledges the gravity of our current situation and cares deeply about the issues of injustice and

polarization that have led to our current racial reckoning and the civil unrest around the country and world. For example, she names the particular problems of entrenched and systemic racism a few times in the book, and acknowledges they are “worthy of much more attention” (p. 58). She has also written in the past (Stitzlein, 2008) about how we can break bad habits of racism, especially the ways we systematically privilege the voice of white people over others and “ignore the perspectives and experiences of people of color” (p. 41). Perhaps anticipating my concern, she even wonders whether “those who’ve held a relatively privileged position in society or in life in general may be more inclined to support” her arguments and approach to hoping as a critical democratic habit (p. 52). In the end, I fear that this may indeed be the case. Her careful reasoning and composed tone will surely appeal to some audiences, but for those who suffer the most in the face of systemic and structural injustice, racism, and violence, who are consistently the victims of “white rage” (Anderson, 2016), Stitzlein’s arguments may feel like more of the same kinds of calls for engaged, participatory civic education that haven’t served them in the past. They might rightly wonder, is pragmatist hope enough to create a truly inclusive and just democracy? The call for pragmatist hope will likely appeal to white, privileged, and liberal thinkers. No doubt this kind of hope can help us to reform educational systems in ways that could garner bipartisan support. However, such hope may not be sufficient to generate the passion and moral urgency needed to fundamentally transform legacies of exploitation, marginalization, and oppression. Even as something more is probably needed for that transformation, Stitzlein still gives us much that is important to consider and some valuable resources needed to create pathways toward a more just world.

References

- Anderson, C. (2016). *White rage: The unspoken truth of our racial divide*. Bloomsbury.
- Cillizza, C. (2020, September 21). *Donald Trump gives himself an ‘A+’ for his handling of the coronavirus. Uh, what?* CNN Politics. <https://www.cnn.com/2020/09/21/politics/donald-trump-coronavirus-grade/index.html>
- Stitzlein, S. (2008). *Breaking bad habits of race and gender: Transforming identity in schools*. Rowman and Littlefield.
- Qui, L. (2020, September 10). *Trump’s false claim that ‘nobody has ever done’ more for the black community than he has*. New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/05/us/politics/trump-black-african-americans-fact-check.html>

About the Author

Kathy Hytten is a Professor in the Department of Educational Leadership and Cultural Foundations of Education at the University of North Carolina Greensboro and a Past President of the Philosophy of Education Society. Her research interests include democracy, social justice, diversity, globalization, and critical theories of race and whiteness.