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Leaning into the Disposition of Hope: Reflections from a Teacher Educator

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Leaning into the Disposition of Hope: Reflections from a Teacher Educator

Abstract

Teaching is multifaceted work that must foster safety, structure, comfort, and connection for K-12 students (Noddings, 1984; Shotsberger & Freytag, 2020; Tomlinson, 2019). During the Covid-19 pandemic, a teacher's presence has necessitated fostering an even greater sense of stability and hope for and in K-12 students. With complex challenges such as teaching remotely and responding to students' mental health needs, pre-service and veteran teachers alike must cultivate hope in professional practice more than ever before. Hughes explores the disposition of hope, offering educators five practical suggestions to seek and share hope, use hope-filled language, find hope in community, and view times of uncertainty as opportunities for hope.

Keywords

hope, teachers, students, uncertainty, pandemic

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Michelle C. Hughes

After the December 2017 Thomas Fire and the January 2018 Montecito Mudslides in Santa Barbara, California, I keenly felt a sense of uncertainty, confusion, and hopelessness. In my role as a pre-service program faculty member, I bore a deep sense of community loss and was prompted to sift through the complex circumstances and my personal emotions. Life in the community of Santa Barbara, my community, was disrupted; lives were lost, evacuations occurred, classes moved online, and clean-up efforts from the devastating fires and debris flow ensued. Consequently, as I began to wrestle with the unexpected losses, I wrote this essay and worked to reframe my definition of hope, both personally and professionally.

Dispositions

My research interests lie in the area of dispositions. Dispositions are the intangible heart skills that teachers need for the classroom and profession. Since writing my dissertation, I have explored the dispositions needed by new and veteran teachers in the teaching profession (Hughes, 2014). My pre-service program has subsequently adopted four distinct dispositions that align with the Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education's definition of dispositions: dispositions are the habits of professional action and moral commitments that underlie an educator's performance (CAEP, 2016). As a result,

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students and faculty in my pre-service program seek to demonstrate each disposition in credential classes, coursework, fieldwork experiences, and in student teaching. The four dispositions (lifelong learner, reflective practitioner, compassionate professional, and grateful servant) are introduced early in the program and are sustained across the program through assignments, lessons, collegial exchanges, reflections, and self-assessments (Hughes, 2014; Westmont Department of Education, 2020, p. 5).

Over the last few summers, I have intentionally chosen to research a "new" disposition to enrich my professional practice. After focusing on resilience in 2018-19, I was inspired to examine the disposition of hope during the 2019-20 academic year; choosing to examine a "fresh" disposition each year fuels a renewed sense of energy and hope in me.

Why Hope?

When I initially dove into reading and learning about the disposition of hope, I wondered how I could share hope with my community--my students, my family, my neighbors, and friends. After experiencing several natural disasters in my community, examining hope, often framed as wish or desire for things to change for the better, felt appropriate. I was motivated to consider where teachers find hope in their classrooms amidst lockdown drills, students' mental health challenges, and even after natural disasters. Since teachers serve on the frontlines as first responders that care, troubleshoot, and help students every day, I wondered how teachers

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tackle hard and unexpected circumstances with hope. I pondered whether or not teachers can even find the time and space to recognize hope in the middle of the day-to-day busyness and stress. Furthermore, I questioned if new and veteran teachers really do find and see hope in teaching, in classrooms, with colleagues, and in the faces of their students.

Ironically, in the middle of my writing and thinking about hope, the Covid-19 pandemic arrived in the United States. In March 2020, the outbreak jolted my local community, along with the state of California, the whole country, and the entire world. The pandemic challenged my personal beliefs about hope. Generally speaking, the notion of hope most often provides inspiration and belief that we will make it through our difficulties. There was no ending point or roadmap at the onset of the pandemic, so many of us felt constant confusion and even despair. I truly wondered if hope could be found. In hindsight, I now know that the circumstances created by the pandemic have also provided a unique opportunity for renewed perspective, professional challenge, and growth. I hope you will find this as you continue reading.

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The disposition of hope, framed as a noun, is often defined as optimism, confidence, courage, promise, and potential. Christian faith recognizes hope and optimism in Christ as seen most prominently each Easter weekend, when Christians go from despair on Good Friday to

waiting for Christ's return and triumphant rise from the dead on Sunday (Keller, 2021).

Plantinga (2002) framed this biblical understanding as yearning: "people yearn for a time gone by... or they long for a certain season, or place, or sound" (p. 3). This yearning or longing points to God; humans essentially want for God and the hope that Christ provides. "Nothing on this earth can truly satisfy us" (Plantinga, 2002, p. 6). Similarly, Christ-like hope is often recognized as "the confidence that God has done something to empower us to wait and wonder" (Spencer, 2018, p. 137). Additionally, hope can be cultivated from

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adversity. "It takes courage and trust in the unseen to press on during a life-threatening storm" (Miller, 2020, p. 219). Increasing responsibilities for teachers in schools, safety concerns, political distractions, and even a global pandemic have exposed the increased need to find hope in and through adversity and in the waiting; educators have been called to seek hope and fight for hope. As we grapple with our current professional circumstances in schools and classrooms, choosing hope can affirm our faith, our work in the classroom, and our calling as teachers.

Seeking Hope

When I picture hope, I often "see hope" in a variety of contexts. I often picture landscapes and nature found in the mountains, seen at sunsets, or experienced on a morning walk. These settings allow me to take a deep breath to observe nature's awe and beauty. I also find hope when I observe a friend's smile or hear her laughter. A smile and laughter can lighten a mood, lift my spirits, and provide perspective. Similarly, hope can also be found in the classroom. When a student teacher

has an “ah-ha” or “lightbulb moment,” when the learning clicks and a K-12 student discovers something new, awe, levity, and perspective are often found. Furthermore, when I am able to help mentor or guide a colleague as she wrestles with a decision, I feel hope-filled. I also see glimpses of hope when my colleagues and I tackle problems together and find solutions. Hope shines in and through these distinct contexts and circumstances.

Additionally, I am reminded that I observe hope in a child’s naivety and optimism. I distinctly remember when I was young and the world was mine, when I felt invincible, and thought I could tackle anything. This type of hope felt infectious and joyful. When life feels heavy and uncertain, as it has during the pandemic, I try to remember and revisit this type of romantic optimism, understanding, and childlike perspective.

Goodwin (2019) recognized that a romantic view of teaching that changes lives is often overshadowed with the discovery of how stressful and difficult teaching can be. The author posited that new teachers are works in progress, are still developing, yet the hope found in a student teacher’s “rose colored glasses” and perspective is

Hope urges us to trust. Hope and waiting, as previously mentioned, essentially become a decision; we are obligated to pause, to be patient, to anticipate, and discover hope in the waiting and longing so to move forward.

needed for the profession. This approach, grounded in romanticism, is focused on the needs of individual students highlighting student curiosity as a means to encourage development (Ryan et al., 2016). In pre-service programs, faculty endeavor to balance romantic idealism for the profession alongside the realities and tensions found in the profession.

Just as the disposition of hope can be studied as a noun, it cannot be overlooked as a verb. Hope as a verb expects, anticipates, wishes, yearns, or longs for something. Hope as a verb, according to

Merriam-Webster (2021), is defined as cherishing a desire; wanting something to happen or be true or to desire with expectation of obtainment or fulfillment. Hope urges us to trust. Hope and waiting, as previously mentioned, essentially become a decision; we are obligated to pause, to be patient, to anticipate, and discover hope in the waiting and longing so to move forward.

Last year, I sat at a memorial service for a friend that passed away far too young. I listened to my friend’s oldest son, John (name has been changed), share about the pain of watching his mom die a harsh and cruel death from Lou Gehrig’s Disease. John spoke of the tension he felt caring for his mom, his anger, his sadness and frustration, yet he named that recognizing tension led him to hope. Prompted to pause, John looked in the rearview mirror at the past. He acknowledged that looking at the hardships and the challenges that he had encountered through his mom’s illness gave him glimmers of hope to go on, to look forward, and to move ahead. By doing so, John was able to recognize the good, the joys, the laughter and the sweet memories that he had enjoyed with his mom even through her illness. John’s testimony further affirms the disposition of hope and the idea that hope flourishes even in difficult circumstances when we pause, look in the rearview mirror, and acknowledge the past.

Likewise, hurdles and joys often carry us through difficult moments and seasons into today. Keller (2021) validated the notion that we can choose optimism and hope when we face difficulties. He noted that through difficult, and often dark times, like a global pandemic, hope is often revealed. Similarly, Downs (2016) advocated for the connection between beauty and perseverance that exposes hope and fuels a person to keep going. She pointed to the idea that beauty can move us forward, inspire us to persevere, push us to dig deep, and forge ahead. Fagell (2020) affirmed, “We can’t alter our current reality, but we can recognize that it’s temporary and situational, and choose to preserve our optimism and relationships and emerge stronger together” (p. 46). Although the pandemic has brought teachers additional stress, we have also witnessed beauty,

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perseverance, and optimism throughout the difficult season. Teachers have gone the extra mile to drop off books at students' houses, email and call parents, teach creatively, and even wear costumes to teach on Zoom. These simple decisions and gestures energize a teacher to keep forging ahead while demonstrating hope to students.

Hopeful Strategies

Specific to educators, France (2019) asserted that for new teachers to become great teachers, they must be encouraged to take risks, make mistakes, and accept uncertainty. I feel hopeful when I seek to identify hope and view hope as an opportunity to learn and grow. Collectively, as teachers, we can choose to set our sights on hope and transfer an attitude of hope to our students. Even when our classrooms feel filled with a lack of hope due to unexpected circumstances such as natural disasters or the monotony of teaching on Zoom during a pandemic, we can choose to embrace hope. Thus, I offer a "hopeful response" or guide of five practical strategies for educators to seek, frame, and identify hope with students and colleagues.

Look for Hope

As teachers, we can intentionally reflect and ask ourselves where we see, find and discover hope in our teaching, at our schools, with our students and colleagues. We can seek to identify hope in remote learning settings. We can intentionally seek to recognize hope-filled moments in our classrooms and school communities. Early on in the pandemic, I observed several student teachers

teaching remotely via Zoom. During each of the observations, I was struck by the level of patience I witnessed, the extensive use of wait time, and the level of compassion and care heard in each student teacher's voice. Observing student teachers in this new and challenging environment highlighted the unexpected skills and dispositions that each student teacher was developing despite the challenging circumstances. This gave me, their professor and supervisor, hope. It also underscored the current circumstance and the student teacher's response as an explicit conduit toward hope. Additionally, as a professional I feel increased hope knowing that remote learning has provided a format for teachers from all over the U.S. and world to connect and collaborate more easily with each other. The pandemic has been overwhelming. Yet, if, as teachers, we are able to choose and reframe these challenges as opportunities for growth, we may be more likely to inspire hope in our students.

Use Hope-filled Language

The use of hopeful words and hope-filled language can inspire hope and joy. Words link us, touch us and sometimes hurt us, yet reframing our communications and conversations around hope can foster and even reset our classroom tone. Intentionally using vocabulary that models hope and what we expect and hope for in others can foster hope. Casas (2020) advocated for teachers to bring their best selves to school each day. He encouraged living out enthusiastic excellence in our work. As teachers we can honor our professional position and set an example of excellence for students by explicitly identifying and talking about hope. Choosing hopeful words can elevate our conversations and speech (Spencer, 2018). For example, I can choose to describe a student as lazy or disinterested, or I can decide to describe and reframe my description of the same student with hopeful words such as the student is not engaged yet; I might even say I need to do more detective work to figure out what motivates the student. Using hope-filled language and hopeful words like these can activate hope within us.

Cultivate Hope

Casas (2020) asserted that school communities are suppliers of hope, thus teachers can choose to share and even shout hope. Intentionally seeking to grow the disposition of hope in practice can help a teacher build greater awareness of hope and for hope. Duckworth (2016) suggested striving to cultivate a hopeful spirit. Tomlinson (2019) recommended engaging in regular collegial conversations about teaching to fuel a teacher's professional growth. Admittedly, not all conversations about teaching are hope-filled, yet teachers can choose to use positive language and focus on the good. Teachers have the power to choose the place from which they teach as well as the route and outcomes they pursue (Moreno, 2019; Palmer, 2007). Collectively and intentionally, as educators we can steer our conversations, our tone, and our community response away from criticism and toward hope. As Palmer (2007) observed, "If we want to grow in our practice, we have two primary places to go: to the inner ground from which good teaching comes and to the community of fellow teachers from whom we can learn more about ourselves and our craft" (p. 146).

Find Hope in Community

Community unites and bonds us; community can shine a light on hope. Throughout his career, famed children's television host, Mr. Rogers, urged his audience to always look for the helpers. Looking for the helpers in difficult times whether through natural disasters, school shootings, or even during pandemics reminds us of hope. Seeking and seeing the helpers touches our hearts and reminds us of our human connection. Throughout the pandemic, I have made the decision to start each of my education classes with a check-in, a question for each student to gauge and identify how they are doing and feeling. In order to demonstrate care, at the start of each class, I ask each student to share how they practice self-care or where they find gratitude during each challenging week. When we use concrete examples, are responsive to students and interact regularly with students, we reinforce a notion of care (Noddings, 2003). When students perceive a teacher's care, their motivation, engagement in class, and connection with the

teacher grows (Milner, 2019; Shotsberger & Freytag, 2020). Efforts like these can even be framed as instances of hospitality that bring connection, much like when we sit around a table eating and talking and getting to know others (Spencer, 2018). Teachers can offer this type of hospitality and welcome to cultivate hope. Hospitality as a context, as more than just an outcome, provides a crucial opportunity for student learning and success. Hence, creating space and context for connection and relationship invites optimism and hope into a school community (Hoerr, 2014).

Recognize Uncertainty is an Opportunity for Hope

Covid-19 has uncovered new vulnerabilities in each of us as teachers, as humans, as professionals. Furthermore, we already know that to teach and to teach well requires vulnerability. Parker Palmer (2007) has consistently encouraged teachers to look within and know ourselves because, "teaching holds a mirror to the soul" (p. 3). Likewise, Brown (2018) championed Palmer's counsel with respect to vulnerability as an act requiring uncertainty and risk of emotional exposure. As teachers, we know that meaningful learning for students and teachers requires vulnerability, mistake making, risk-taking, and a growth mindset (Dweck, 2006). Furthermore, recent research supports investing in teachers' humanity and risk-taking to encourage vulnerability to empower, learn, and cultivate greater human connection (France, 2019). This thinking links us back to the context of hospitality and welcome providing a framework for building human connection and trust. Furthermore, hospitality begins with relationship and serves as a powerful framework for thinking and behaving in relationship with our students and as Christians and in school communities (Latunde, 2019). Hospitality serves as an invitation for hope and is a disposition worth pursuing.

Conclusion

Most often, teachers are called to provide comfort, safety, and connection in face-to-face classroom settings. When the pandemic first demanded the world's attention in 2020, pre-service programs and veteran teachers had to suddenly adjust to an

educational landscape of uncertainty. A year later, a teacher's consistent presence over Zoom has demonstrated and provided a sincere sense of hope and stability for students (Rogers, 2019). As teachers reflect on the last year, glance in the rearview mirror and as we look ahead, we have a choice to intentionally choose to capitalize on the pandemic's unexpected circumstances to foster human connection, build bridges, and problem solve or not.

Early on in the pandemic, I wrote a reflection about my work as a teacher and caretaker of pre-service teachers. These words captured my initial thoughts and emotions as the pandemic began; I felt grief alongside my students, grief over life as it once was and for what it wouldn't and couldn't be. My words detail my perspective as well as the investment we choose to make as teachers. I am reminded of the hope that students unknowingly foster and inspire in us:

I am a teacher of teachers and a person who is high touch, highly interactive, and extroverted. With that said, the last few weeks [at the start of the pandemic] have brought a deep sense of loss. One of my pre-service program's strengths is that we are deeply relational. Our Education Program strives to model building relationships with students starting in the first class meeting each new semester. We greet at the door, high five our students, and invite them into learning about what they can do in K-12 classrooms. Our team, and those before us, have built strong school and district partnerships in the community. In every education course, we make efforts to demonstrate teaching strategies that cultivate classroom community, value human connection, and model knowing and seeing each individual student and his/her own story. Zoom, videos, Facetime and phone calls are all helpful, creative, and necessary tools during this pandemic, yet one of my colleagues and I discussed just last night that we feel like we are letting our students down. I know personally and professionally that we don't have control over the current situation--this is our new reality and challenge. We are all doing our best and are humbly reminded that the need for human proximity, physical touch, sharing and creating laughter, demonstrating passion for content, and engaging in dialogue together in the same room is missing and it stings. Our team continues to move

forward with hope--I must say that I and we, recognize, value, and are thankful for human contact more than ever and we can't wait to be together with our students.

After first putting these thoughts down on paper, I took a beach walk and quickly recognized the warmth of the sunshine and the sparkle on the ocean's waves. The setting provided space for me to contemplate what I needed to learn during the unexpected season. I questioned whether I could do better and be better for those in my life: my students, my family, my neighbors, my church, and my circle of friends. By simply asking these questions I felt a spark of hope and renewal grow in me.

Educators have the opportunity to transform how we behave and respond, one classroom at a time. We can choose to frame our work, its significance, and our practice through a hope-filled lens. Looking for hope, using hope-filled language, cultivating hope, finding hope in community, and recognizing uncertainty as an opportunity to foster hope are a few simple recommendations for teachers to implement. Teachers can make the uncompromising decision to seek and model the disposition of hope. We can align our actions and moral commitments with the disposition of hope. As we grapple with an uncertain future, whether we are Zooming, standing six feet apart on the playground, or high fiving students at our classroom doors, I enthusiastically propose that we commit to seeking hope in relationships, hope in our students, hope in our colleagues, hope in our school communities, and most importantly hope in Christ. By leaning into the disposition of hope, may we discover the unexpected gifts in our work. Furthermore, because, "faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance in what we cannot see" (NIV, Hebrews 11:1), let us wholeheartedly invite hope into our classrooms.

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