

Teaching Hope: Cultivating Pragmatist Habits

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Training students in non-cognitive concepts such as grit has gained attention as pivotal in explaining success, separately from intellectual capabilities. Grit research has associated highly successful people with passion and perseverance toward a long-term goal.⁴³ Gritty people understand the connectedness between their efforts and goal attainment; they are seen as focused and self-disciplined in the pursuit of their goals. This common sense logic seems reasonable: most people can point to a time in their life when they have utilized such skills to bring about a difficult to achieve outcome. We do not dispute tendencies related to grit are important, but we do believe they are not sufficient or the best approach to helping children succeed when facing substantial challenges.

This article postulates that pragmatist hope offers a more comprehensive framework than grit, since pragmatist hope not only focuses attention on outcome attainment, but concurrently develops the skills, dispositions, and values that will be leveraged toward those goals. Moreover, pragmatist hope frees students to consider changes not only for personal gains, but for the common good. As such, we explain how a pragmatist view of habits of hope can

overcome shortcomings with popular accounts of grit, as well as make practical the call for instruction that builds in students skills associated with pragmatist hope.

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We will first turn our attention to more fully illuminating the definition of pragmatist hope, carefully uncovering specific meanings of key terms in that definition, which author Sarah has recently developed. Then, we offer more detailed notions on teaching for pragmatist hope, grounded in activities used by author Lori in her own classroom. In the end, we believe that teaching for pragmatist hope is an important aspect of instruction for educators to consider, since the habits developed provide the means to enact both personal and social goal-oriented activity.

What is Pragmatist Hope?

I, Sarah, have recently defined “pragmatist hope, as a set of habits ... most essentially, a disposition toward possibility and change for the betterment of all.”⁴⁴ We begin by unpacking several of the key terms in this definition. First, *hope* is not simply naïve optimism or a rosy outlook. Instead we employ a Deweyan account of habits to argue that hope is *a set of habits*. Unlike common understandings of habit as merely repetitive ways of doing things, for Dewey habits arise from our impulses and develop into demands for action. Habits compose us, including the ways we typically reason,

1. Angela Duckworth, *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance* (New York, NY: Scribner, 2016).

⁴⁴ Sarah Stitzlein, “Teaching for Hope in the Era of Grit,” *Teachers College Record* 120, no. 4 (in press).

move, and communicate.⁴⁵ They not only propel us to act, but also give us the thought, reflection, and bodily movement we need to fulfill those demands with ease. Further, hope is a disposition—a way of acting—that works toward improving outcomes for ourselves and others. In this we do not act in the same way over and over, but, conversely, have a predisposition toward inquiry, creative problem solving, action, and evaluation each time we encounter a new situation which requires our focus. Hope as a habit, then, embraces this notion of humans consciously and habitually engaging with the world around them to bring about change for the better. Developing these habits is what teaching for hope is about.

Having a *disposition toward possibility* highlights the human prerogative toward improvement instead of repeating past actions. Dewey viewed such a disposition toward improving the world as worthwhile in and of itself.⁴⁶ Seen as a productive disposition, such hopefulness orients us toward the possibility that change could occur as the result of intelligent action, thus engendering a tool for reconstructing oneself and the world around us.⁴⁷ So having hopeful habits means we are “living in hope,”⁴⁸ and perhaps even maintaining “hope on a tightrope,”⁴⁹ since such hope is necessarily positioned in tension alongside the realistic view of the world, requiring that we lean toward hope or fall into despair.

Hopeful people creatively imagine alternatives and work toward their attainment. Relat-

edly, Sir Ken Robinson⁵⁰ suggests that children are born able to imagine and take risks, but that this capacity decreases with years of schooling. Teaching for hope, then, taps into the need to reverse this trend by encouraging students to enact “imaginative operations:”⁵¹ blending innovation and action in a “refusal to stand still”⁵² when faced with challenging circumstances. Teaching for hope, then, is not wishfulness or just optimism, a vantage point from which one may dream or spectate from the side, imagining that a goal can be achieved without any effort on the part of the dreamers. Hopeful people eschew such a position as they actively struggle against what currently exists.⁵³

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Hope is advanced and informed by action, often requiring steadfastness and sacrifice, and grounded in the complexity of real problems. Teaching for hope asks students to use “crea-

⁴⁵ John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*. In *The Middle Works* (1899-1924), Volume 14, edited by Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1922).

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Patrick A. Shade, “Habits of Hope: A Pragmatic Theory of the Life of Hope” (PhD diss., Vanderbilt University, 1997), <http://philpapers.org/rec/SHAHOH-3>.

⁴⁸ Stephen M. Fishman and Lucille P. McCarthy, *John Dewey and the Philosophy and Practice of Hope* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 4.

⁴⁹ Cornel West, *Hope on a Tightrope* (Carlsbad, CA: SmileyBooks, 2008), 6.

⁵⁰ Sir Ken Robinson. “Do Schools Kill Creativity?” TED video, 19:24, Filmed February, 2006, Retrieved from https://www.ted.com/talks/ken_robinson_says_schools_kill_creativity?language=en

⁵¹ Shade, “Habits of Hope,” 32.

⁵² Henry A. Giroux, *America on the Edge: Henry Giroux on Politics, Culture, and Education* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

⁵³ Cornel West, “Prisoners of Hope,” in *The Impossible Will Take a Little While*, ed. Paul Rogat Loeb (Cambridge, MA: Basic Books, 2004), 293-298; Shade, “Habits of Hope.”

tive imagination in projecting a future⁵⁴ that is grounded in present and historical reality, to assess the resources needed to put their plan into action, to define potential barriers to success, and then determine whether they are willing to pay the costs⁵⁵ associated with enacting that plan. Moreover, these flexible habits provide structure for ongoing hopeful action, offering us a means of directing emotions, such as frustration and anger, toward productive, intelligent action. While reality can present itself as overwhelming and unalterable, hope offers us the language of possibility, and alleviates the “stagnation of fatalism”⁵⁶ we may feel; emotions that tend to immobilize us can instead be channeled into creativity and forward efforts.

Visualization of hopeful end goals is not a simple process of laying out a long term plan about which one feels passionate and needs to draw upon personal reserves of self-determination to stay the course, as described in the grit literature. Instead, goals may be conceptualized as incremental, emergent and revisable, since the ultimate goal may not be clear in the beginning, and each step forward offers an enhanced view of the end. Dewey called such goals ends-in-view.⁵⁷ Every action and evaluation of the resulting experiences boosts the person to a new place from which to ask new questions and refine his or her vision of the long-range goal. Pragmatist hope, then, is necessarily action-oriented.⁵⁸ Courage is required as we move beyond assessment of a situation and prepare to act to alter the present condi-

tions.⁵⁹ All outcomes of action—no matter the level of success—provide new information to us. Reflecting upon the outcomes of past action generates cognitive resources for improving the intelligence of our subsequent actions,⁶⁰ plus we gain confidence through the “hard work of generating hope within everyday circumstances.”⁶¹

Finally, pragmatist hope includes yet moves beyond individual goal attainment, providing methods that allow students to advance goals *for the betterment of all*—those aims unlikely to be achieved alone. In this, pragmatist hope draws upon Dewey’s notions of meliorism.⁶² Meliorism is the belief, despite the realities we see around us, that people have the potential and the willingness to make the world a better place. Therefore, pragmatist hope based on meliorism entails working with others to improve the world’s conditions for oneself and others.

Notably, grit has often been studied in successful individuals, such as spelling bee winners and West Point cadets, as a means of isolating characteristics, such as perseverance and dedication, of individuals who have achieved their pre-established individual goals.⁶³ Unfortunately, there has been a “worrisome correlation between family income and Grit Grid scores,”⁶⁴ meaning that wealthier students tend to have higher measures of grit. This relationship may suggest that wealthier students may have access to resources that better help them achieve their personal goals in a focused and timely way, while poorer students may lack such means or may have their goals thwarted or delayed by

54. Judith M. Green, *Pragmatism and Social Hope: Deepening Democracy in Global Contexts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 101-102.

55. West, *Hope on a Tightrope*. West responded to Obama’s call for audacious hope, stating, “Well, what price are you willing to pay?” drawing attention to associated costs of hope; these should not be limited to resources on the ground, but also the cognitive and emotional resources required of those who opt to be willing to live in the coexisting tension between the hope and despair.

56. Stitzlein, “Teaching for Hope in the Era of Grit.”

57. Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*.

58. Stitzlein, “Teaching for Hope in the Era of Grit.”

59. Shade, “Habits of Hope.”

60. Gert Biesta and Nicholas C. Burbules, *Pragmatism and Educational Research* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 108.

61. Akiba J. Lerner, *Redemptive Hope: From the Age of Enlightenment to the Age of Obama* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015).

62. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*. In *The Middle Works*, (1899-1924), Volume 7, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980).

63. Duckworth, *Grit*.

64. *Ibid.*, 237.

having to attend to pressing problems of lives that wealthy students are sheltered from.

Habits of hope build on the lessons learned from past engagements, building capacity for future intelligence action.

In contrast, pragmatist habits of hope may be a construct that is more amenable to groups of students from diverse backgrounds, because it contextualizes hope within current realities, acknowledging the conditions under which improvement efforts must be conducted. Students for whom basic living circumstances present a challenge may have less cultural capital around goal-setting, particularly goals typically aligned with school and work success. They may have encountered fewer positive outcomes, resulting in a weaker sense of correspondence between effort and positive outcomes, and in fact see luck as a key factor in success.⁶⁵ For such students, teaching pragmatist hope in schools provides a means to developing habits to which they might not otherwise gain access. As such, teaching pragmatist hope may be a missing component to improving outcomes for all students, as called for in current national educational policy.

While grit unites passion with perseverance to tenaciously achieve long-term goals,⁶⁶ its focus on individual goals tends to leave the world unchanged. Some critics equate the grit narrative with meritocratic thinking that says less successful people simply need to focus and

work harder to attain their goals.⁶⁷ Such critics have pushed back against grit because there is no acknowledgement of the impact of differing experiences—particularly those that are systematically unequal for some groups of people.⁶⁸ They feel the grit narrative may “overlook the persistence that many children have already demonstrated” under difficult life circumstances.⁶⁹ Moreover, we would not want to “place blame on the victim for not being gritty enough and urging him or her to just overcome structural hurdles that are often so significant that they cannot be tackled alone,”⁷⁰ such as “chronically underfunded education systems serving high numbers of linguistically, culturally, ethically, and racially minoritized learners... [who] cannot ‘overcome’ inequitable funding patterns and structural opportunity gaps through the adoption of the grit narrative.”⁷¹ Such structural inequalities possess the potential to shut down hope,⁷² so it is vital for people to possess the methods of pragmatist hope with which to “wrestle with despair”⁷³ and to determine an alternative social vision upon which to focus united action. Pragmatist hope offers a framework for directing such creativity and action, and should be cultivated within the classroom where both growth and cooperative thinking should regularly occur.⁷⁴

In summary, pragmatist habits of hope are not simply repetitive activities, but are instead flexible habits used to continuously seek im-

65. Bernard Weiner, “The development of an attribution-based theory of motivation: A history of ideas,” *Educational Psychologist* 45, no. 1 (2010): 28–36.

66. Duckworth, *Grit*.

67. Noah A. Golden, “‘There’s still that window that’s open’: The Problem with ‘Grit,’” *Urban Education* (2015), 1–28. doi: 10.1177/0042085915613557

68. Ibid.; Christopher C. Jett, “I once was lost, but now am found”: The Mathematics Journey of an African American Male Mathematics Doctoral Student,” *Journal of Black Studies* 42, no. 7 (2011): 1125–1147.

69. Stitzlein, “Teaching for Hope in the Era of Grit.”

70. Ibid.

71. Golden, “The Problem with Grit,” 5.

72. Shawn Ginwright, *Hope and Healing in Urban Education: How Urban Activists and Teachers are Reclaiming Matters of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

73. West, “Prisoners of Hope,” 297.

74. Giroux, *America on the Edge*.

provement. Such habits build a disposition toward progress and an increased sense of agency, while still recognizing the complexity and barriers embedded in the situation. Habits of hope build on the lessons learned from past engagements, building capacity for future intelligence action. In the next section we further link the elements of pragmatist habits of hope to practical teaching ideas.

Establishing a Hopeful Classroom Culture

Teachers influence students' learning through both direct and indirect means. By choosing the specific materials and instructional methods for engaging students with the curriculum, teachers' decisions directly impact what students learn. But students also indirectly learn what is valued, what type of learning counts, and whose ideas matter through less obvious elements of the classroom environment. The classroom culture is constructed through modeled and accepted behaviors.

Teachers establish the classroom culture when choosing their mode of instruction and the ways students will interact with the subject material and one another. Establishing a culture that advances the development of the habits of hope embraces many of the teaching techniques regularly utilized in many classrooms. For example, many teachers now recognize the value of discourse and inquiry approaches to enhancing student learning. Such practices simultaneously support teaching for pragmatist hope, since they embrace the joint consideration of problems and allow students to determine moves to try out different solutions.

John Dewey believed that students should see school, not as a preparation for life, but as a

mode of social life itself.⁷⁵ Developing Deweyan habits for hope, then, would embrace activities to address real, present, social problems. Instead of merely telling students to have and pursue dreams, teachers can actively support students through the problem solving process as a means to developing their own capacities toward hopeful living. Through discourse around real problems, teachers apprentice students into practices—habits—around group definition of the problem, possible solutions, and markers of success. Teachers can begin this process with very young learners, and deepen students' capacities to face more complex problems over time. With practice older, more skilled students are positioned to become part of the social force which jointly envisions and enacts a more just world for all. Problematic situations are discussed and taken seriously. Students are empowered to develop feasible, intelligent plans of action, and then carry them out. Students see not only the teacher, but also their co-collaborative peers with whom they act, as resources for defining and solving problems. Such an environment creates a space for students to view themselves as active agents and grow their disposition toward possibility—as opposed to apathy or defeat.

Importantly, teaching for hope empowers students with habits and methods to critically question how the world works, and why some problems seem inevitable and unalterable. Students with these competencies may use their creative imaginations to project a world quite different from the one in which we presently exist.⁷⁶ Yet simply working harder individually will not alter the current state of affairs. Thinkers who embrace notions of criticality⁷⁷ against

⁷⁵ John Dewey, *Experience and Education in The Later Works* (1925–1953), ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1938): 12:1–62.

⁷⁶ Green, *Pragmatism and Social Hope*.

⁷⁷ Nicholas C. Burbules and Rupert Berk, "Critical Thinking and Critical Pedagogy: Relations, Differences, and Limits," in *Critical Theories*

the status quo work toward greater understanding of the complex systems within which we operate. Discourse and planning within a group of similarly-minded individuals, along with ongoing habits of hope to propel us forward, will be necessary to make headway toward the goals of greater equity and justice.

Developing Communication Skills to Build Group Capacity

Using a problem solving approach to guide efforts toward developing a disposition for hope is a concrete means to understand this process. The problem solving model generally includes steps for defining a problem, determining possible causes of a problem, brainstorming various solutions, debating and deliberating over the merits of possible alternative actions, choosing and implementing a course of action, and ends with evaluating of the outcome. Several intersubjective skills are key in this process. Pragmatists view the intersubjective world as one in which “we live and act together and for which we have a shared responsibility.”⁷⁸ Teachers can intentionally create situations to support students’ skills for dialogue, deliberation, and evaluation, all necessary for collaborative problem solving.

Students can improve their ability to effectively dialogue around problematic situations with practice and feedback. Such skills are already a part of the curriculum in most subject areas, and can be leveraged toward real problems. To dialogue effectively, students must learn to explain their ideas using precise language and to justify their reasoning orally and in writing. They must also learn to actively listen, both to understand the speaker and to probe the logic of the ideas offered. Teachers can

support students’ growth in these areas through small- and large-group discourse. As they facilitate discussions, teachers also model how to respectfully question, clarify, and summarize ideas. Teachers may also use think-alouds⁷⁹ to make meta-cognitive practices transparent, allowing students access into the decisions made during written communication. Teachers who prioritize dialogue and written communication improve students’ abilities to explain and justify. Students working to jointly solve problems use such skills to define and address problems so that processing of important information is clearer within the group.

Defining success also reminds us that failure is a possibility.

Students also need to practice deliberating over ideas before choosing a course of action. Teachers can support improved student capacities for considering alternative solutions. Deliberating over ideas often requires separating ideas from those who offer them. Putting time between the brainstorming of ideas and the decision making process is one strategy to reduce student reactivity. Additionally, allowing group discussion time for outlining the pros and cons of each course of action is helpful in generating more ideas than during a whole group discussion. Anonymous voting may allow students to vote their conscience instead of with their friends.

Students may be familiar with decision making based upon a majority vote, but teachers can extend their knowledge around other possible means for choosing a course of action. Using dialogue to uncover the merits of various options may help students creatively combine

in Education: Changing Terms of Knowledge and Politics, eds. Thomas S. Popkewitz and Lynn Fendler (New York: Routledge, 1999): 45-65.
⁷⁸. Biesta and Burbules, *Pragmatism and Educational Research*, 108.

⁷⁹. Barak Rosenshine, “Principles of Instruction: Research-based Strategies that All Teachers should know,” *American Educator* 78, no. 3 (2012): 30.

two or more strong ideas into a new, better option. Another alternative may call for the enactment of a compromise position with which no one holds strong opposition, asking, “Can we all live with this course of action?”

Co-defining the end vision, as well as what results constitute success, should occur while considering which choice to enact. The end vision is negotiated and refined as students determine what embodies success. Informed decision making considers not only the best action, but the plan that can be accomplished with the resources available, and within the commitment level of the group.

Instead of viewing figures such as Reverend Martin Luther King or Nelson Mandela from the successful ending perspective, we must allow students admittance to the turmoil they endured.

Defining success also reminds us that failure is a possibility. To curtail an immobilizing sense of failure later, teachers should discuss this possibility with their students, helping them to recognize that commitment and follow-through increase the probability of success in the endeavor. Acting while acknowledging the complexity of the situation and the barriers to success is an important component of pragmatist hope. “Even in situations where groups are defeated, the worthy act of trying to change something that is meaningful sometimes buffers the emotional low that comes from defeat.”⁸⁰ Bolstering an ideal that forward movement in the face of an uncertain outcome is worthwhile is a core tenet of hope that builds

sustainable engagement around the possibility of improvement.⁸¹

Evaluation is the final stage in the problem solving model, signaling completion and the need for reflection. Students compare their results to the defined markers of success. Emphasis should also be placed on recognizing the knowledge gained through the solution attempt.⁸² Evaluating outcomes provides useful knowledge for moving forward, “something we use in order to live, work, and act in the world.”⁸³ Future intelligent action is founded on such knowledge.

Evaluating outcomes goes beyond a simple dichotomy of success or failure. A more nuanced reflection allows for deeper understanding that is valuable for future problem solving attempts. For example, if the outcome has brought about the desired outcome, but requires ongoing attention, students must determine whether they can continue to commit to such ongoing activity to maintain the positive outcome. Or if the outcome did not match with the measures of success fully, but additional efforts seem capable of bringing about success, students may determine to add more time and effort into the project. If the outcome was deemed a failure, students need to engage around possible influences in that failure, considering whether an unidentified barrier blocked success but may now be overcome in light of the new understandings generated. If the failure seems related to the lack of full implementation or follow-through, students may resolve to re-engage more fully or abandon the project as too costly. In the end, students receive new information as a result of their action, no matter the level of success. Moreover, developing such habits of hope changes the individual’s sense of agency, allowing each to

⁸¹ Shade, “Habits of Hope.”

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Biesta and Burbules, *Pragmatism and Educational Research*, 69.

⁸⁰ Shawn Ginwright, *Hope and Healing*, 24.

see herself as possessing the potential to change their circumstances through focused action.

Course Material Selection: Avenues to Possibilities

School curricular expectations typically have flexibility in the material used to develop writing, reading, and critical thinking skills. By carefully choosing materials that align to the overarching goal of developing pragmatist habits of hope, teachers can provide students access to broaden their sense of agency and their vision of what is possible.

To support students' capacities to envision a different reality, one which they have never experienced, teachers should tap into the rich history of historic figures who have made a difference. Importantly, students need access to stories that have not been sanitized for happy endings, but instead should include accounts of struggle regarding decision making in the midst of the project and should include times when some of those choices have not worked out well. Some examples of this type of material can be found in the Zinn Education Project: Teaching a People's History.⁸⁴ Instead of viewing figures such as Reverend Martin Luther King or Nelson Mandela from the successful ending perspective, we must allow students admittance to the turmoil they endured. Creatively generating possible solutions, wrestling with the potential negative impacts of their choices on their and their loved ones' lives, and moving past bitter disappointments provide significant insights into the real thoughts and doubts with which hopeful people might engage. When reading such accounts, it is important for teachers to pause and allow students to consider and share how the historic

person likely felt in that moment. Allow the student to imagine himself as a participant alongside that figure. A similar example, located at The National Underground Railroad Freedom Center in Cincinnati, Ohio provides students with an immersive video experience that permits students to feel both the hope of escape and the fear of capture that a slave might have experienced.

Pragmatist hope embodies a set of habits and a disposition for possibility that may be developed in all students. As such, it provides a more comprehensive framework than grit, which situates goal attainment within one's capacity to persevere toward long-term, predetermined goals.

Contemporary figures are also avenues for capturing stories of struggle and hope. Detailed television segments and newspaper articles provide stories of people who have worked to overcome dire situations.⁸⁵ Local figures and students' family members may be a fruitful source of stories of hope. For example, we invited the parent of one of our students in as a guest speaker to share the hope for an improved future that motivated moving his family from Nigeria to the U.S. This gentleman conveyed the detail of the difficulties of leaving his beloved homeland through words and artifacts. Additionally, he discussed the importance of working within a network of peers to provide mutual, ongoing support. Students were able ask questions related to his experiences and the decisions made. Fishman and McCarthy note that a key to living in hope is to look with grati-

⁸⁴ Zinn Education Project. "Teaching a People's History." <http://zinnedproject.org/teaching-materials/explore-by-resource-type/>

⁸⁵ Shade, "Habits of Hope."

tude to our ancestors who have enacted hope, recognizing the tradition of hope they have begun.⁸⁶ These biographical accounts widen what we conceive of as possible, but also contribute to building courage in ourselves; knowing what has been possible before gives us confidence.⁸⁷

Finally, narrative texts whose protagonists must wrestle with problems is another means for generating discussion around problems and developing habits of hope in students. Students are able to witness the inner struggle that the characters go through, making this process transparent to the reader as well as creating a sense of normativity of such action. An example of a character who discovers a significant, hidden problem and determines to act to improve the situation occurs in *The Giver* by Lois Lowry. Jonas, assigned to become the new Receiver, discovers that the seemingly utopian world in which he lives regularly euthanizes individuals, and his foster brother, Gabe, is scheduled for this fate. Jonas moves toward hope by creating a well-conceived plan with a full awareness of the cost of failure. Thus biographical accounts as well as literature offer students a means to consider problematic situations in light of fear and possibility,⁸⁸ building habits of hope in students.

Conclusion

Pragmatist hope embodies a set of habits and a disposition for possibility that may be developed in all students. As such, it provides a more comprehensive framework than grit, which situates goal attainment within one's capacity to persevere toward long-term, predetermined goals. In contrast, teaching for the intentional development of pragmatist hope emphasizes involving students' capacities to define and

solve a variety of problems. Growing a disposition toward change alongside interpersonal communication skills further develops group capacity to affect change together. Practical experiences allow students to connect the relationship between their actions and improved outcomes. They come to view themselves as change makers who are confidently capable of envisioning alternative, superior ends that may alter the world in meaningful ways. Like grit, habits of hope have the potential to increase student capacity for reaching their personal goals, yet broadens the possible scope to include visions shared with others. As such, teaching for pragmatist habits of hope is an important and viable goal for educators to embrace.

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⁸⁶ Fishman and McCarthy, *John Dewey and the Philosophy and Practice of Hope*.

⁸⁷ Shade, "Habits of Hope."

⁸⁸ Judith M. Green, *Pragmatism and Social Hope*.