

The COVID-19 Pandemic - Silver Linings for Some but not All

By Ken Futernick

June 4, 2020

© Copyright 2020

TeacherStories.org

Hello Teacher Story listeners. This is your host Ken Futernick. Today I won't be interviewing a guest because I want to share some of my own thoughts about the teacher stories I've been collecting recently during the COVID – 19 pandemic.

Over the past couple of years, I have been posting stories about great teachers and the profound difference they often make for students.

Recently I've posted several stories about how teachers and students are coping with the current health crisis. With each interview I've asked about silver linings—whether anything positive is emerging from this crisis. Every person I have interviewed so far has had one. Sometimes several.

The pandemic's silver lining for Judy Valdez, a high school student in San Diego has been gratitude. Now more than ever she says she is grateful for the health care system that her family has access to, for her teachers, and her relationships with friends and family. Judy says she'll never again take for granted the pleasure of a simple handshake.

Megan Sargent, a homeschooling parent from North Dakota, whom I interviewed recently described a tough day-- "a perfect storm" she called it in the midst of the pandemic when she and all three of her children found themselves crying ...all at once. No academic learning took place that day because the frayed nerves, the uncertainty about the future, the social isolation had, well, put them over the top. By the end of the day, after some tearful dialogue, things in the Sargent finally calmed down. Megan said the silver lining for her family were the lessons they learned about relationships, kindness, and forgiveness.

For Rachell Auld, a high school biology teacher and self-describe optimist, her silver lining has been time. She says she does not want to demean all of the struggles that people are experiencing, but, "as odd as it sounds," she explains, "I never have the ability to just slow down and let my mind catch up, let, my body catch up."

I've enjoyed sharing these stories because they provide some inspiration and hope to teachers, parents, students— that some good things are emerging from the crisis.

But I am reminded that many of us with silver lining stories also have secure jobs; we have money in the bank; we can get medical care from our doctors; we have enough food for our families; we have internet access that allows us to connect with teachers. friends and relatives. That does not mean life with COVID-19 is easy, but we are far more likely to cope and to have inspiring stories to tell if these basic life supports are in place.

Sadly, there are many people among us right now – children in particular – for whom there are no silver linings, and it’s doubtful that stories about silver linings would inspire them very much.

Imagine what life is like in homes where parents have lost their jobs and health care coverage along with it; imagine how students are coping after being isolated from their friends for months on end; imagine how families are managing when they don’t have enough food or basic household supplies; imagine what it’s like not to have money to pay rent or your mortgage payments. Imagine what it’s like, right now, to be homeless. Well, this IS the reality for millions of families in America today:

- And here is another disturbing reality. According to Childhelp, an organization that tracks child abuse in the US, annual referrals to state child protective services have in recent years involved about 6 and a half million children annually, but reports of abuse during the pandemic have plummeted, not because child abuse is waning, but because teachers, guidance counselors, and other mandated reporters cannot see what children are experiencing at home. Many experts fear that abuse and other forms of domestic violence are actually increasing—dramatically-- just as they have after hurricanes and other natural disasters.
- And then there is access to the internet. Some researchers estimate that as many as 163 million Americans lack broadband access. And because of the digital divide, most of them are poor. With nearly 50 million children in the US sheltered in place at home, most schools are providing some form of online instruction. But online learning--or connecting with friends and relatives for that matter, or being able to locate and order food or medical supplies is virtually impossible for students and families who aren’t connected to the internet.

Yes, this is a pretty bleak picture. So why would I want to call attention to it on my Teacher Stories podcast? Around the time I began asking myself that question I came across an article by a writer who, in the midst of the pandemic, proudly labeled herself a pessimist. In her defense she referred to some reputable psychologists who warn against the dangers of being overly optimistic. Some of them even use the phrase, “the tyranny of positive thinking.” What? How could anyone associate having a positive attitude with such a pejorative phrase?

Some of my most influential teachers have taught me to be hopeful in the midst of adversity, to be open to new possibilities, to expect a positive result in the face of danger. Negative thinking, pessimism, assuming the worst becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy that virtually guarantees that one’s worst fears will be realized. Pessimism is the force that causes one to give up, to stop looking for clues, solutions, and answers that could turn things around.

But as I delved into the literature on the dangers of positive thinking I came across another unfamiliar term – “defensive pessimism,” which, it turns out, is not the same thing as hopelessness or the impulse we feel to throw in the towel when we think we’re out of options.

Defensive pessimism is the sense I have now that's telling me that I cannot keep looking only for stories with silver linings. This form of negative thinking compels one to be on the lookout for trouble, to be open to the possibility that life's circumstances are genuinely untenable for some, and that no amount of optimistic thinking ("You can do it!" "Keep your chin up!" "Look on the bright side") will really matter, except perhaps for the ones who utter these words of encouragement. Certainly not for abused or hungry children. What they need is an environment that is safe and free of violence. They need food. Of course it will help if the providers of these basic life supports are caring and hopeful, but one without the other – kindness and positive thinking in the absence of tangible remedies is pointless at best, and insulting and harmful at worst.

I want to draw attention to bleak stories because I don't want us to lose sight of the children in our communities whose pandemic stories are about pain, anguish, suffering, and fear, and not about silver linings. If we ignore them or pretend these stories don't exist or try to be positive by focusing exclusively on stories with silver linings, we risk normalizing and simply accepting the dreadful conditions that disproportionately affect families that are poor and of color.

Yes, we need to hear stories of hope but just as importantly we, especially those of us in a position to make a difference, must hear stories about people--especially children, who face unbearable obstacles--those for whom there are no silver linings.

So, what can be done to make a difference? I don't pretend to have lots of answers but here are a couple of suggestions:

- If you are a teacher, an educator, a social worker, a parent or even a student you can start by finding out what resources are available in your communities for those who need assistance with the basics such as food, financial assistance, medical supplies, healthcare, technology, employment and legal issues, housing, and insurance. Then you can help make sure that every family knows about these resources – especially the ones who are not online and those who don't speak English.
- On this note, I want to share a story from one of our podcast episodes because it illustrates how these efforts can make a difference. The story is titled, "Students Help Solve Problems Caused by the Pandemic." At a high school in San Diego, teachers and students spoke about how, after the pandemic closed their school, they began phoning every one of over 1000 families to make sure they had computers and a connection to the internet. For those who didn't the student volunteers, often speaking in the native languages of the families they were calling, helped them obtain the free resources they needed to get connected. Not only could the students in these families now participate in online learning, they could reconnect with relatives and friends.
- OK, if you are not a teacher or educator, I suggest reaching out to your local community foundations and other organizations that have established COVID-19 relief funds to assist families—especially the ones that are the most vulnerable. You'll find links to such organizations in every state at www.commfoundations.com. Consider donating what you can to these organizations.

- And, of course, we must all put pressure on local, state and national leaders to be equitable, to ensure that all Americans, especially the most vulnerable, receive the support they need to survive this crisis.

Thank you listening to this podcast episode. I hope you will share it with others that might be interested. If you have a story that you can share that draws attention to the problems children face, or if you have a story about what people or organizations are doing to make a difference, please tell us about it on teacherstories.org. You can also write to me at ken@teacherstories.org.

Be well everyone.