



## Teaching Teachers How to Teach Hope

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### ABSTRACT

*Can teachers teach hope? This article considers Synder's hope theory as a rationale for the importance of teaching hope to students and teachers. Through a low and high hope example, the idea of agency and pathway thinking are explored. Resources and ideas are shared on how teacher preparation programs might take up teaching hope.*

**Keywords:** hope theory, teacher education, teaching hope

### INTRODUCTION

*Hope Begins in the Dark* – Anne Lamott

There has never been a more critical time to think about what and how we teach teachers. The political, social, and educational climate in our country have put teachers in a position where they need to draw on knowledge, skills, and dispositions we have not been attending to well, or at all, in teacher education. We need to be teaching teachers how to be hopeful and how to teach their students to be hopeful.

If teacher candidates develop resilience and hope, it is by chance, and not intentionally embedded as part of their coursework or clinical experiences. Coursework and clinical experiences provide plentiful opportunities to teach hope, something we often think of as a character trait that some people have and some people do not when, in fact, hope and being hopeful can be taught. Teacher preparation programs would be wise to take up the idea of teaching it in their programs.

*If you can't fly, then run. If you can't run, then walk. If you can't walk, then crawl. But whatever you do, you have to keep moving forward. – Martin Luther King, Jr.*

Almost 20 years ago, in his article titled “Hope Theory: Rainbows of the Mind,” Synder (2003) defined hope as “the perceived capability to derive pathways to desired goals, and motivate oneself via agency thinking to use those pathways.” A person’s pathway and agency thinking skills are learned over the course of childhood, but people who lack hope as adults were not taught these thinking skills, or circumstances disrupted their hopeful thinking during their childhoods. However, we have the potential to develop pathway and agency thinking throughout life.

If we apply the same logic as we have learned about resilience, there is hope for hope. The most powerful way to teach children how to be resilient is by having a resilient role model. Often, that model is a teacher, although teachers do not necessarily know they are serving as resilience models for students. Similarly, if a teacher is hopeful and can make agency and pathway thinking transparent to students, the result will be to shape students’ abilities to enact agency and pathway thinking. Synder’s work informs us that hope is learned and that we learn hopeful, goal-directed thinking in the context of interacting with others. In schools, every day presents challenges when decisions need to be made that engage agency and pathway thinking.

## **DISCUSSION**

### *Examples of integrating the teaching of hope into teacher education*

Consider these examples of a low-hope versus a high-hope second grade teacher and how they might approach a situation differently.

#### *Low-Hope Example*

Teacher: Class, I have something to tell you, and you are going to be disappointed. We are not going to be able to go to PE today.

Class: (Students groan and moan.)

Teacher: I know, Mr. Smith is out again and he does not have a sub.

Class: (Students ask questions and make statements.)

Teacher: Ok, ok. Calm down. Hopefully, this doesn’t happen again on Thursday. I’m not sure what we’ll do during PE. Now, let’s get ready for math.

### *High-Hope Example*

Teacher: Class, please sit on the rug so I can give you some exciting information about how our day is going to change today.

[Class sits on the rug.]

Teacher: Mr. Smith is not feeling well today and needed to stay home. Do you remember a time you didn't feel well?

Class: (Students nod and say "yes.")

Teacher: We hope Mr. Smith is back for PE on Thursday, but this gives us some extra time today to something else. Does anyone have any ideas?

Class: (Students provide a range of ideas.)

Teacher: Those are very good ideas. I had an idea too. What if I get special permission for us to take the parachute out and play with it very carefully in the gym. Who do you think I would ask for that permission?

Class: The principal and Mr. Smith.

Teacher: Ok, I will ask those people. Do you think we could take very good care of Mr. Smith's parachute if we get permission?

Class: (Students squeals with excitement and exclaim, "yes!")

The high-hope example demonstrates the way a teacher might proactively approach a situation that might disappoint students by framing it as an opportunity to do something different and modeling empathy with others. By giving students the chance to generate ideas as well as think of who would need to grant permission, the teacher allows students to practice pathway thinking. The same questions, as well as asking the students if they can take good care of the parachute, get at the concept of developing agency, or their belief that they can confidently find alternatives to problems.

### *Hope inventory and surveys*

It is interesting to participate in a measurement of hope, which can be a useful tool to generate conversations or mark progress over time. Three scales are provided in Synder's article that are short and easy to score. The Hope Scale serves as a dispositional self-report measure of hope (Snyder et al., 1991). The Children's Hope Scale (CHS) is a six-item self-report measure of children's perceptions that they can meet their goals. The Adult Hope Scale, or the Trait Hope Scale, measures pathways and agency thinking. Exposing teacher candidates to these tools to gather baseline data and learn more about themselves and their students is one way to centralize hope as a teachable growth mindset (Dweck, 2006).

### *Sharing the benefits of high hope versus low hope people*

Synder found that higher-hope people consistently had better outcomes in academics, athletics, physical health, psychological adjustment, and psychotherapy. Synder describes a high-hope person pursuing a specific goal as being able to create or produce a pathway of at least one plausible route, with a sense of confidence in this route. Pathways for a low-hope person are far more tenuous, and the resulting route is not well articulated. Confidence, coupled with the ability to determine a route, results in a higher likelihood that high-hope people will be able to accomplish their goals.

Goal accomplishment is important, but even more compelling is the impact being hopeful can have on physical health, self-esteem, and the ability to adjust to life's circumstances. High-hope people are even more able to endure pain. For our purposes, we are closely considering the educational implications. High-hope students are able to stay on task and attend to the appropriate cues in particular learning and testing environments. High hope as compared to low-hope students are less prone to become sidetracked by self-deprecatory thinking and counterproductive negative emotions (Synder, 2003).

Teachers form the other half of the academic performance coupling and can serve students well by teaching them clear ways to problem-solve. Teachers often help students to consider multiple pathways and to activate their confidence towards achieving goals, but we do not underscore the importance of these teachable moments and how they may be contributing to how hopeful a student may become later in life.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS / NEXT STEPS**

### *Assist teacher candidates in reflection*

Seminar courses or clinical experiences provide ample opportunities to discuss cognitive dissonance related to problems of practice or critical incidents. Assisting teacher candidates in their reflective practice will help them understand how they are exhibiting agency and pathway thinking, which may contribute to helping them staying hopeful. Teacher preparation programs should clearly articulate the through line between goals, problem-solving, patterns of thinking, and outcomes as they relate to hopefulness. The more clearly teacher candidates understand these linkages and the benefits of being hopeful, the more likely they will feel confident in shepherding their students in the process.

## *Lesson planning*

Coaching teacher candidates in how to integrate ways to teach hope into their lesson plans may give them the explicit opportunity to practice so they feel secure in applying this to their teaching practice. If a teacher is a low-hope person, asking them to teach hopeful thinking may not be realistic. They will not be able to serve as a critical role model for students who need to be guided on the continuum of hope. However, by integrating these teachings into teacher preparation programs, we are increasing the likelihood a teacher will leave a program more hopeful than they started and will be able to teach hopeful thinking to their students.

## **CONCLUSION**

In the words of Maya Angleou, “hope and fear cannot occupy the same space at the same time. Invite one to stay.” By teaching teachers and students to be more hopeful, we replace fear with hope. In a world where there is a lot of fear right now, hope is a teachable life skill that will benefit teachers and students for years to come.

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