Instilling Hope In Students

by Jennifer L. Bashant, Ph.D.

WHY HOPE?

Why is hope such an important concept for schools to consider? Over 20 years of research has clearly demonstrated that more hopeful students perform better in school and in life than less hopeful students. Hopeful thought reflects the belief that one can find pathways to desired goals and become motivated to use those pathways. As a result, hope drives the emotions and well-being of people…an essential component of one's happiness and success in life. Hope is positively associated with the following outcomes:

- √ Self-Efficacy and Self-Worth
- √ Better Attendance
- √ Optimism
- √ Higher Grades
- √ Life Satisfaction and Well-Being
- √ Athletic Achievements
- √ Physical Health
- √ Social Competence (Snyder, Rand & Sigmon, 2000)

Research in positive psychology suggests that creating hope may be a process we can control versus being an inborn attribute (Sheehan & Rall, 2011). To have a hopeful school, you must have hopeful teachers as they are the engine driving hope.

HOPE THEORY

Charles R. Snyder (1944-2006), a Distinguished Professor of Clinical Psychology at University of Kansas, developed the field of positive psychology and Hope Theory. His theory of hope consists of three components. The components are:

1. **Goals** - Hope Theory is based on the assumption that people's actions are goal-directed (Snyder et al, 2000). Goals may be short- or long-term, must be attainable and almost always contain some degree of uncertainty. Levels of hope are highest when there is a high probability the goal will be attained. This notion is supported by the work of Daniel Pink (2011) who asserts that mastery of a particular goal or task is motivating. In other words, when we believe we will master a particular task and accomplish a goal, we are motivated to keep working toward that goal. It is easy to see why it is so important for students to have successes in the classroom. Without experiences of mastery, students will experience very little motivation to persevere.

2. **Pathways Thinking** - This refers to one's belief that they will be able to find a solution to a problem or meet a desired goal. Pathways thinking touches on Albert Bandura's concept of self-efficacy, or "one's belief in one's ability to succeed in specific situations or accomplish a task" (Bandura, 1994). Bandura (1997) defined four factors that are at the heart of the belief in your own effectiveness (self-efficacy): (1) mastery experiences, (2) vicarious experiences of others, (3) effective persuaders, and (4) a positive social-emotional climate (Sheehan & Rall, 2011). Students who have high self-efficacy have an increased ability to self-regulate their behavior. Problem solving and critical thinking skills are important as people generate several alternative solutions to achieve a goal. As barriers present themselves, high hope people are adept at finding a different way to reach the goal.

3. **Agency Thinking** - This is the motivational component of Hope Theory. Angela Duckworth's research is about the importance of helping students develop perseverance and grit, and that these characteristics have even more to do with achievement than IQ (Duckworth & Seligman, 2005). Hopeful people use self-talk messages such as, "I can do this," and "I am not going to be stopped." When a barrier presents itself, agency thinking (motivation) allows one to put into motion a new plan of action.

As illustrated in **Figure 1**, after setting a goal, pathways thinking (self-efficacy and problem solving) increases agency thinking (motivation and perseverance), which encourages more pathways thinking then agency thinking, which eventually leads to goal attainment. Once a goal is attained (sense of mastery), one is motivated to repeat this cycle. However, if one sets a goal and barriers present themselves, the goal is not reached. There is a risk of negative emotions and a decreased feeling of hope. Bandura states that when this process is continued over time, people may increase self-judgment and people treat themselves in a very negative way. An eventual sense of

Figure 1
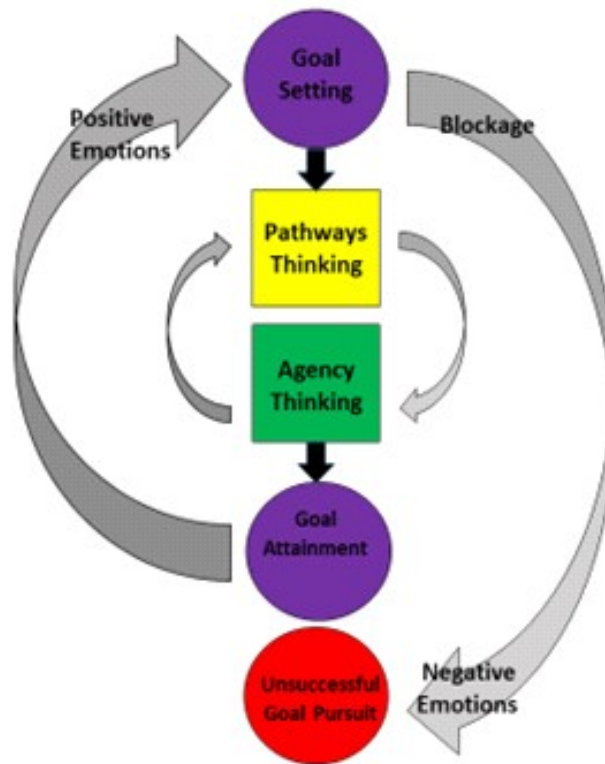
hopelessness results in low self-efficacy, poor motivation and an unwillingness to take risk because of the possibility of failure. Students must mindfully deal with the powerful and negative emotions that they experience when things go wrong. These negative emotions are natural, and as long as we don't let them control us and paralyze us with fear, they can be very useful in guiding future action.

STRATEGIES FOR INSTILLING HOPE IN STUDENTS

Dr. Snyder states that, "our most precious commodity as teachers may be the time that we share with our students" (2005). This time can take place before school, during or after school, on trips, weekends, sporting events or clubs. Teachers inadvertently plant seeds of hope by spending large amounts of time with their students.

According to Deborah Mills-Scofield (2012), instilling hope, or the belief that something is possible and probable, should be part of your strategy in the classroom. Some basic principles of using hope as a strategy for student achievement are:

♦ Base hope on fact, not fiction; Hope supports "realistic optimism."
♦ View failures as learning opportunities

♦ Take a strengths perspective and focus on what is working
♦ Use optimism as an act of rebellion against status quo

Best-Practice School. De La Salle School in Freeport, NY (grades 5-8) is a highly effective school with a 100% high school graduation rate, despite the odds that only one in three students will graduate based on the hardships and adversity in this community. Students attribute most of their success to the relationships with their teachers and the school culture built upon Hope Theory. Here are some of the school's best practices:

(1) Every morning students recite affirmations such as:
  - I am a leader by choosing to do the right thing even when it means that I am standing alone.
  - I give back to those less fortunate than myself.
  - I dream big.
  - I work hard to achieve my dreams.

(2) There are subtle and constant persuaders that all students can achieve these goals. These shared goals and beliefs help to create a positive social-emotional climate necessary to foster hope.

(3) Goals are reinforced and maintained through weekly award assemblies that recognize goal achievers and celebratory newsletters and posters of past and current award winners.

(4) Small class sizes of 15 to 17 students enables teachers to focus more on each student which allows every student to experience mastery (One of Daniel Pink's three human motivators: mastery, autonomy and purpose - Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us, 2011).

(5) Alumni of the program serve as mentors and living proof of the success that is possible for current students. According to Hope Theory, alumni are persuaders sharing their life stories and demonstrating that "others just like you" can achieve these goals.

(6) Teachers and students write and share their personal stories of hope and dream big visions with the whole school (Sheehan & Rall, 2011).

Additional Hope-Building Strategies:

1. **Hope Finding** - the process of making students aware of hope in their own frames of mind as well as in others. The Children's Hope Scale (Snyder et al, 1997) is a simple way to measure hope in students. Teachers can introduce students to the concept of hope through literature. This vicarious learning can teach students the language of hope and highlight how the characters attained hope.

2. **Hope Bonding** - relationships that serve as persuaders that we will attain our goals and dreams. Every teacher and staff member must serve as persuaders if a school is to create a culture of hope. Teachers must understand the power of their influence to create positive self-beliefs.

3. **Hope Enhancing** - programs that help students form clear goals, develop pathways to achieve them, summon the energy and will to meet those goals, and to reframe obstacles into challenges. The goal here is to get students to buy into their futures. Researchers Susana Marques and Shane Lopez (NASP Communique) offer practical strategies for teachers (**see illustration below**):

4. **Hope Reminding** - development of a feedback loop allowing students to self-monitor and regulate their hope-enhancing processes. Strategies include use of a hope reminder checklist, reviewing personal help stories and bonding with people to reinforce hope goals and remove barriers (Sheehan & Rall, 2011).

Hope Enhancing Practical Strategies for Teachers

Goal Setting
Encourage goals that excite students.
Help students select goals in different life domains and rank them by importance.
Teach students how to set clear markers for goals.
Encourage students to also set some "we" goals instead of just "me" goals.

Pathways Thinking
Help students break down goals into smaller sub-goals.
Support "keep going" thinking. If one pathway does not work, try others.
Help students recognize if they need a new skill and encourage them to learn it.
Remind students that they can always ask for help.

Agency Thinking
Help students to set "stretch" goals based on past performance.
Help students monitor their self-talk and encourage them to talk in positive voices ("I can do this," and "I will keep at it.").
Tell students stories and provide them with books that portray how other students have succeeded or overcome adversity.

EVIDENCE-BASED PROGRAMS

Although any teacher can begin instilling hope in students by following the basic principles of Hope Theory and implementing some of the specific strategies discussed in this research brief, some schools may be interested in implementing a formal, research-based hope-building program. The following programs have been shown to significantly increase hope in students in particular grades.

♦ Making Hope Happen for Kids (Edwards & Lopez, 2000) - this is a five session program developed to increase hope in fourth graders. This program takes an experiential learning approach by having students engage in role play, game playing and story development. Results indicated a significant increase in hope levels pf students.

♦ Making Hope Happen for Kids (Pedrotti, Lopez & Krieshok (2000) - this program was developed for seventh graders. Results also indicated a significant increase in hope.

CONCLUSION

Humans are wired for hope - we can almost always find a bright spot, even in darkness (McKee, 2008). Given that the development of hope is a process that can be impacted, and those students who are currently hopeless can learn to be hopeful, schools have a wonderful opportunity to significantly impact childrens' lives for the better. The first step is the realization that having hope is an essential component in the foundation of students' educational journeys. As with any change we are trying to make, it helps to have a laser-like focus, and the concerted effort of all members of the school community, and the use of data to establish a baseline. Lastly, it is important to monitor student progress as this will enable schools to meet the challenge of instilling hope in their young learners. Learning the process and developing the skills to be a more hopeful person are assets your students will carry with them far beyond the walls of the school. Many students face significant adversity on a daily basis, but instilling hope can empower a lifetime of learning.

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