Fostering Hope with Children's Literature

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How can teachers use literature in the classroom to help students explore their emotions, understand how others have navigated challenging circumstances, and build hope in discouraging times?

Pause and Ponder

1. What are you doing in your physical or virtual classroom to create hope?
2. Describe a time when a book helped you understand a situation from a new or different perspective.
3. Is there a project that you and your students can do at your school or community to cultivate a sense of hope and community?

Children's Literature: Inspiration in Today's Troubling Context

When students and teachers left their classrooms on Friday in mid-March of 2020, none of them realized that they would not return to business as usual the following Monday. The world for students and teachers had changed in dramatic ways--indeed, a seismic shift with the reality of COVID-19. American students and their teachers would experience another seismic shift on Memorial Day of 2020, when an 8 minute and 46 second video from a smartphone would share the systemic racism and the lived reality for decades of many people of color in America, particularly of Black people when the final moments of George Floyd's life were documented and became a catalyst for a global racial justice movement. Any one of these events can be understood as trauma with immediate and potential long-term impacts on students' and

teachers' health and well-being (Kendall-Tackett, 2020). As our students feel the weight of the many changes and stressors in their academic, social, and family lives during this time, how can we meet the needs of our students, especially when many of those in the most formative years may be silent as they attempt to process the perplexities in their environments? In this paper, we discuss the role of hope in the classroom using children's literature as inspiration.

The trauma of recent events will continue to be with us (Kendall-Tackett, 2020) and we can use literature, incorporating a broad array of genres, as a tool to help students (and teachers) both process and gain some sense of control and agency over what has happened. Here, we view children's literature as encompassing a broad categorization of texts (including fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and other expanded notions of traditional text). Children's literature is a powerful medium in the "social construction of perceptions and narratives" (Hayden & Prince, 2020, p. 1). Readers can see the world in which they live reflected in nonfiction as it conveys ''information about the natural and social world'' (Duke & Bennett- Armistead, 2003, p. 22). Fiction helps readers see the world through characters' lived experiences and the tensions and situations resolved. For example, through historical fiction readers can learn about the experiences of emotions of individuals from backgrounds similar or different from their own (Crisp, 2015). Contemporary texts invite readers to "construct meanings in the world of text and to seek potential meanings with others outside of the text" (Ivey & Johnston, 2015, p. 257). It is from this position that we focus our paper on utilizing the connections between hope theory and children's literature.

Hope is instrumental in how we move forward as a profession. We examine how utilizing understandings of hope as both a theoretical construct and pedagogical tool can provide comfort and inspiration during uncertainty and trauma. We begin by describing the basis for this view

and then move to ways of using children's literature from this perspective. Throughout this article, we will use examples from texts that are among our favorites, informed by our local communities, our own experiences as teachers, parents, and researchers. We offer these texts as examples with the understanding that readers will select texts that are representative of the diverse linguistic, social, and ethnic and racial composition in their own local communities and lived experiences.

Building Hope: In Theory

Hope is a "galvanizer of action" (Lazarus, 1999, p. 666) and can lead students to interpret pathways to solving problems, seek more challenging goals, and negotiate their agency (Bullough & Hall, 2011). By hope, we echo scholars who have studied hope in youth and have defined this construct as a sense of optimism for the future (Maholmes, 2014; Te Riele, 2010). We want to acknowledge that for a large majority of the world's youth who live on the margins of a society, hope in this manner implies pursuing a pathway that is possibly dangerous while demonstrating optimism (Lear, 2006; Smits & Naqvi, 2014). Thus, we emphasize that hope for the future is not simply "repeating and holding onto ideas, but instead found in in re-imagining practices [and] reconceptualizing our practices and institutions to more ably reflect the situations in which we live" (Smits & Navati, 2007, p. 211). We expand on views of hope to include "radical hope" where individuals actively pursue a life away from "culturally devastating events" (Lear, 2006, p. 133). In this sense, the use of childrens' literature for advocacy becomes a means "to respond to conflict, violence, and other forms of offense with courage and practical reasoning" (Smith, 2018, p.5).

Hope is more than feeling good. Hope theorists (Snyder, Rand, & Sigmon, 2002) emphasized that hope is a cognitive process. As Lucas and colleagues (2020) explained, "[Hope]

is characterized as a human strength that involves a person's capacity to (a) clearly conceptualize goals (goals thinking), (b) create ways or strategies to achieve those goals (pathways thinking), and (c) initiate and sustain motivation for using those strategies (agency thinking) to effectively obtain what a person is looking for" (p. 200).

Children's literature can serve as a pathway for modeling to students the ways in which individuals can organize their thinking toward a sense of hopefulness. For example, literature that invites readers to hope might involve stories that share nonfiction and fictional accounts of how others have dealt with social and emotional stressors (e.g., global pandemic, racial injustice) (Dutro, 2008; Koltz & Kersten-Parrish, 2020; Rodriguez & Kim, 2018); how to process traumatic experiences (DÁvila et al., 2019; Wiseman, 2013); pose questions about their lives (Wee, Park & Choi, 2015); and as a way for students to express their own emotions and understand their experiences (Phillips & Sturm, 2013; Sipe, 2000; Wiseman, Atkinson, & Vehabovic, 2019). This requires purposeful selection of texts and learning experiences where texts are used to support and value the individuality of students while connecting their cultural and linguistic strengths (Authors, 2020). Using hope as a means to cultivate collaboration supports a view of learning within a socio-cultural framework where readers develop their positions and roles as readers within a community of practice (Lave, 1988; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). From this stance, reading is viewed as relational (Moje, Overby, Tysvaer, & Morris, 2008), extending our understanding of a transactional approach (Rosenblatt, 2006) where readers interact with the text, the author, and with one another to create shared meaning. In this view, reading can influence social behavior (Ivey & Johnston, 2015). In the following sections, we explore practical pedagogies for how this looks in an elementary classroom.

Building Hope: In Practice

To conceptualize how to move hope from theory to practice in an elementary classroom, we organize the instructional approaches in the student level, classroom level, and community level. In the following, we outline how these student-directed practices support avenues for hope-building using literature.

Student level

Lucas and colleagues (2019) wrote "hope is one of the most powerful psychological predictors of success in youth. It is what enables people to set-valued goals, to see the means to achieve those goals, and to find the drive to make those goals become a reality" (p. 199). We want students to build their awareness of their own actions and personal responsibility and offer them opportunities to take action as we honor students' experiences, backgrounds, and languages (Campano & Ghiso, 2011). To that end, we share definitions of hope with students, including that hope is more than a feeling and that it includes setting goals, making plans to achieve the goals, and taking action. We also contextualize through critical discussions with our students how opportunities to set these goals exisits within a backdrop and reality of historical biases and institutional and systematic constraints that have far too often marginalized immigrants, refugees, people of color, and undocumented immigrants (Rodriguez, 2020). We aim to examine these contexts and provide counternarratives and pathways to navigate these realities by inviting parents, elders, and communities into our discussions of hope (Hayden & Prince, 2020). We use texts as a catalyst to facilitate discussions and help us understand how others have achieved their goals for better lives.

Anchor Texts and Discussion

We start by building a shared awareness of hope within texts by introducing students to specific texts. One of our favorite anchor texts to engage students in conversations of equity and

hope is, *Mama's Nightingale: A Story of Immigration and Separation* (Danticat, 2015). In this text, Saya's mother is detained in an immigration detention center. This picture book details the conversations and experiences between Saya and her mother. Engaging students in discussion about Saya and her mother's goals, plans, and actions. Table 1 offers examples of other anchor texts with discussion prompt suggestions. The explicit connections to hope include helping students understand their own reading process, setting specific goals around what books they want to read and what academic goals they have, and identifing what steps they need to take to meet those goals.

< insert Table 1 here >

We believe that anchor texts should be texts that we return to again and again. Miller (2012) described returning to *The Lotus Seed* (Garland, 1997) multiple times across the year with her first grade students. This gave them opportunities to make connections to other experiences and texts, as well as read and talk about new thoughts they had after hearing it again. Instead of trying to explain all that students should know about complex topics, we let them ask questions and discover. On a concrete level, this offers students a benchmark of hope as they realize how much more they know and can understand across the year. Specifically, this book offers a beautiful analogy of hope as a dormant seed that can be planted and nurtured over long periods of time.

Independent reading

As we are introducing anchor texts, we also ask students to read independently. Independent reading may seem an unlikely practice to associate with hope. However, independent reading can serve as a way for students to actualize the elements of setting goals,

making plans, and taking action rather than passively listening. Independent reading is built on three principles: opportunities to read, access, and choice.

Independent reading is based on allowing students the opportunity to read, defined as instances when students encounter connected texts and have some responsibility for that encounter (Guthrie, Shafer, & Huang, 2001). When students have multiple opportunities to read, they have multiple chances to get better at reading connected text. Opportunities to read connected text are correlated with increased fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (Guthrie et al., 2001; Brenner & Hiebert, 2009).

The issue is not simply that students need more opportunities to read independently. Specifically, our students need access to meaningful, authentic, and culturally relevant texts (Garcia & Kleifgen, 2020). This might come in the form of a classroom library, a virtual library, or invitations of stories and lived experiences by family members and communities (Author, 2016; Ibarra et. al., 2020). The importance of a classroom collection, especially one reflective of multiple perspectives, cannot be overstated in our efforts to provide opportunities for students to make and understand tenets of hope. There are many considerations. Some teachers who have been identified as exemplary noted that they had 1,500 or more books in their libraries (Allington, 2012). These books need to be carefully curated, culturally relevant, and of high-interest to engage readers.

Finally, students need choices. Decades of research on motivation to read confirms that students are motivated by choices (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2017; Ivey & Johnston, 2015). Reasonable choices include choice about what to read and about how to represent what they learned—in multiple modalities (i.e., visual, written, audio, and performance).

Classroom Level

Independence is critical. However, we acknowledge that hope is fostered and supported with others. Supportive peers help students understand critical messages: "You are not alone. You are connected. Your voice matters." The connection and valuation of student voice means that students are considered knowledgeable and have one another to help them set goals and act agentically (Szelei, Tinoca, & Pinho, 2019). While we continue to use anchor texts for class discussions about hope, we also move students into student-directed practices such as book clubs and student-directed writing.

Book Clubs

On a global scale, book clubs have been used by multiple groups, including terminally ill patients, veterans, prisoners, parents of sick children, and more to help process their emotions and make connections (Heath et al., 2017). In schools, book clubs are used as a pedagogical approach for a variety of purposes, including allowing students opportunities to choose texts that they want to read (Fisher & Frey, 2018), to leverage differing prior knowledge and to encourage student choice and autonomy (Miller et al., In Press), and promote community (Jocius & Shealy, 2017). To leverage book clubs as a place for discussions about hope, we support the cognitive components of setting goals and taking action by asking students to decide what books they will read, how much they will read, and even how they will demonstrate understanding of what they are reading. We watch and listen to see if and when groups need help with decision-making and discussions, but we assume that they can learn to direct their own learning.

Specific to their book club conversations, we offer some question-starters for discussion designed to help students focus on particular elements of hope.

<insert Table 2 here>

Further, we help students reflect on their process as a group. At the beginning of book clubs, we ask students to set goals for their group, as well as to create a plan for how they'll meet those goals. At the end of book clubs, we ask students to reflect on questions such as, "Did we accomplish those goals? How could we improve our work together?"

A common concern with book clubs in general and those that focus on hope specifically is that students will "miss something" in the text or in the core curriculum. However, Miller et al. (In Press) found that classrooms that used culturally-relevant texts, chosen by students, demonstrated higher scores on the traditional end-of-grade tests than in similar classrooms where only the core curriculum was used. As Aukerman (2008) reminded us all:

> We need to stop framing our teaching around ways of reading (i.e., comprehension strategies or specific interpretive techniques) driven by our adult sense of what is important. Instead, our teaching should be mindful of and meaningfully led by students' shifting social and intellectual intentions as they engage with text and with each other. . . I propose we let go of our obsessive focus on ensuring that the students are "getting it." (p. 57)

Writing for Hope

While books offer windows, mirrors, and doors (Bishop, 1990), they can also offer invitations for students to value and share their own stories. We situate writing as a classroom-level component because we want students to develop their voice for an audience of peers, building towards communicating with others during the community-level learning opportunities described in the next section. Gallagher (2011) in his text *Write Like This,* stated that, "If we are to build students who grow up to write in the real world, we must move our writing instruction beyond a 'cover the state standards' mind-set by introducing our young writers to additional real-

world discourses." (p. 8). We pause here to note that, just as we view text broadly, we also view writing as multimodal and beyond just the written word (International Literacy Association, 2017).

Specifically, we support students' hope as we value their stories, provide them with the tools to share their stories, and honor their writing. We encourage students to create their own stories for wordless books such as *Bluebird* (Staake, 2013), using captions or simple sentences written in languages of their choice and talk about different choices made to tell the story. We give students opportunities to write about their own experiences by modeling small moments with *Family Pictures* (Garza, 1990) and creating a classroom book of our own small moments. We invite students to share what they know in their own books or essays. At each point, we invite students to share their work with others in one-on-one, small group, and whole class settings so that the value of multiple stories is reinforced and students view their ideas as something valuable and important (Adichie, 2009). We spend time talking as a class about the power of communication and writing and the ways in which these elements help us take action to realize our goals, all part of the larger dialogue about hope in our classrooms.

Community level

If hope is an action, then we want to prepare our students for action beyond the classroom. This stance helps us align across disciplines, specifically with the National Council of Social Studies' C3 Framework (NCSS, 2016) and the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS, 2013) emphases on interconnectedness of systems (NGSS, 2013) and taking informed action (NCSS, 2016). We want to move beyond personal hope and help students consider how to set goals, create plans, and take actions that provide support to others. To accomplish this, we focus on two areas: classroom action projects and independent research topics.

Classroom Action Projects

For younger students, action projects help connect literature to needs and actions within local contexts. We use text collections as the basis for our action projects.

<insert Table 3 here>

Further, we adapt an action plan framework, such as the one found in Figure 1 to fit specific grade levels. We help students access different sources in the text collection, using some as whole group sources and giving students, or groups of students, choices about what others they sample. We use this framework to help students decide on a course of action, again emphasizing that hope for a better neighborhood or world is not simply waiting for a good feeling; instead, it is taking action and being part of a solution.

<Insert Figure 1 here>

To illustrate, we like to start whole-class with graphics, maps, and charts to help students access visual information. When focusing on food scarcity and production, we use maps from Feeding America (2020) that show areas of food scarcity. Seeing local needs provides multiple opportunities for corporate goal setting, plans, and actions. We then conduct a whole class read aloud with *The Good Garden: How One Family Went From Hunger To Having Enough* (Milway, 2020) before letting students explore other sources from the text collection. We work as a class to create an action plan, such as locating a food bank or similar support system within our community on a local map and then planning a classroom container garden or school garden. If we can produce enough goods to donate, we share with the local food bank. If not, we problem solve about what else we might need to do so that we can share produce with others.

A more global focus might include a book such as *The Water Princess (*Verde & Badiel, 2016) about a mother and daughter who must walk miles from their African village to find water

for their daily needs. Based on the real life of Georgie Badiel, this book can be linked to websites, such as UNICEF's maps showing countries around the world that still lack access to clean water. After understanding more about the issue of clean drinking water, students can begin to develop a plan of action by following the stories of the Georgie Badiel Foundation that supports clean water projects, as well as the stories of children who have made a contributions to organizations such as UNICEF/WASH to provide more people around the world with clean water.

Independent Research Projects

Just as we moved from class read alouds that highlighted anchor texts to independent reading, we mirror that transfer of independence at the community level by moving from a class action project to independent research projects. This offers students an opportunity to explore topics that might interest them. Broad topics such as natural disasters may result in students' specific and particular interest in focused areas such as providing for pets lost in hurricanes (Authors, 2016). That is, we give students a chance to tell us what they know, what they're interested in, and possible solutions. This process mirrors the cognitive components of hope, specifically setting goals, making plans, and taking action.

Modeled on the idea of Genius Hour projects (Spencer, 2017; West & Roberts, 2016), students are allowed to choose topics of their own interest. These projects can be introduced after we've done class action projects so that students are familiar with thinking about problems/challenges and possible solutions, rather than simply learning more information about a topic. They are able to use the Action Plan Framework (Figure 1) that they used for class action projects to structure their independent research.

As other researchers (Johnston, 2020; Authors, in press), we find that students have lots of things on their minds and are thinking about complex issues such as homelessness, equity, economics, and more. These projects give students opportunities to explore topics that we would not have posed or delve deeper into particular facets of other action projects completed as a class.

An essential component of any work done independently is time for sharing with others. Ideally, students share multiple times throughout the projects. We provide opportunities for them to share informally with others, as well as asking for more formal times of sharing. We use the formal sharing situations to support multimodal composing, including art, written elements, and digital presentations, adapted to the age of the student. Additionally, we use class meeting time to reflect specifically on the goals, plans, and actions that students are taking and explicitly connect these elements to hope.

Conclusion

We emphasize that structuring classroom practices to focus on using hope with children's literature is needed now more than ever to empower, uplift, and engage students and communities in critical conversations about race, culture, and belonging. In today's highly pressured landscape, where so many students and teachers feel without a voice, we propose focusing on hope. Further, we emphasize that the practices described in this piece are not all or nothing; teachers can integrate these practices throughout the year while still using core programs. Our current context has demonstrated over and over that we need to attend to more than numbers to support students and learning. As Johnston (2020) wrote, "we need to apprentice students into humanity, not just learning to decode and answer questions about texts" (p. 7).

Take Action

1. Consider your students' current lived experiences. Identify challenges together that they are facing. Survey a few or all of your students to learn more about their challenges and if they have had experiences with literature that have inspired hope.

2. Evaluate your classroom library or the virtual texts students can access. Do these texts provide opportunities for students to consider how others have faced similar challenges?

3. Focus on each of the three areas introduced in the article.

   - Student level: How do you encourage individual students to set goals, make plans, and take action?

   - Classroom level: How do you foster community in your classroom? What specific connections to hope can you make in these communities?

   - Community level: What opportunities for action do students have beyond the classroom level? What other opportunities could you make available?

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