

Centering Hope in Social Studies Education

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As social educators, we want students to learn how to improve the world. Some of us see our teaching as directly linked to civic action while others take a more indirect approach, but it's safe to say that we all expect social education to help students work toward a better future, in one way or another.

When we teach about social issues, though, we may unconsciously encourage students to give up hope. By calling attention to how serious the world's problems are, we may create a sense of despair. When young people study environmental challenges, for example, they often become frustrated and pessimistic, and this can lead to fatalism, passivity, and inaction—exactly the opposite of what we want. As one teen said, “[Climate change] makes you a bit panicky and stuff. Like oh I’m going to die, what’s the point of doing anything, we’re all going to die.”¹

It's easy to look at the dire state of the world and conclude that most of us have little ability to solve the problems that face us, particularly when we see the power held by unresponsive governments, oppressive ideologies, and exploitative corporations. Declining levels of trust and political efficacy, combined with rising inequality, have led to a “politics of despair.”² To counter this, we must provide students a sense of hope—a belief that a better world is possible, and that human action makes a difference.

Why Does Hope matter?

Hope is central to democratic life. Without hope, people have little reason to take part in the hard work of addressing or resolving societal problems. As Sarah Stitzlein has written in *Learning How to Hope*, “When we are hopeless, and especially when we are in despair, not only are our individual lives more difficult but also our social and political

lives suffer. We find ourselves disempowered, unable to solve shared problems and create improved ways of living and working together.”³

Hope provides an antidote to feelings of despair among young people, especially when learning about serious problems such as climate change. Rather than fear-based messaging, or a focus on the complexity and existential threats posed by climate change, hopeful framings emphasize how people can identify and take effective action to respond to a changing environment. This motivates young people to engage in positive social action and promotes psychological and emotional well-being.⁴ The same principle is relevant to all the world's pressing social issues, from poverty to racism to warfare and any number of others.

Given that much of social education is focused on empowering young people to contribute to society, both now and in the future, it is unsurprising that a significant proportion of history, geography, and civic education *implicitly* focuses on hope. Embedded within the curriculum is an assumption that by providing young people with the necessary skills, knowledge, and dispositions, they will be positioned to help their communities address societal issues and imagine a different and better future. However, we rarely give hope much explicit attention. Even when dealing with potentially hopeful content—such as successful social movements—we may fail to highlight its relevance for today. We can do better.

What is Hope?

Hope is a word thrown around a lot recently, and it can have many different meanings. For some, hope means patiently waiting for a better world, or having faith in a higher power. But Jane Goodall, in *The Book of Hope*, suggests that

passivity is the opposite of hope, and that real hope requires action and engagement.⁵ This kind of hope can be short-term and pragmatic or long-term and visionary, but both varieties involve three key elements: possibilities, goals, and pathways.

- *Possibilities* refers to the belief that change is possible—that ideals of a different world have meaning and are worth striving for. This is what motivates people to work toward change, for without believing in the possibility of a better future, there would be little to reason to put in the effort.
- *Goals* are central to hope because they provide an intentional target for planning and action. Goals can be short- or long-term, clearly articulated or fluid, easily achieved or difficult, but hope would be difficult without some concrete idea of what can be achieved.
- *Pathways* are plans or routes to achieve hopeful goals. Seeing and articulating multiple plausible and effective pathways toward success, even in the face of obstacles or impediments, is a key element of hope.⁶

By centering these elements of hope more directly, we can promote students' belief that humans can collectively change their world, and we can engage them with the knowledge they need to act on that belief. In the sections that follow, we illustrate what it would look like to spotlight hopeful social action. This is not meant to be a recipe for curriculum, because teachers will choose differing examples depending on subject, grade level, and their own commitments—and those of their students. Nor are these examples classroom-ready. Teachers will have to identify resources and develop plans that match their own settings, their own styles, and their own students' needs. We hope, though, that these examples can inspire educators and illustrate what it would mean to teach for hope in social education.

Pragmatic Hope

Pragmatic hope is the belief, based on a careful

analysis of evidence, that a better future can realistically be attained—not just someday, but soon, through feasible strategies that are currently available. This kind of hope is focused on making a tangible difference in people's lives today, grounded in a detailed understanding of practical considerations and real-world conditions.⁷

Possibilities

Studying cases of successful social action helps students believe that efforts in the present can lead to important changes in the world.⁸ Teachers can draw on cases of social movements that already are part of the curriculum, such as the fight for civil rights and women's suffrage, as well as those involving groups who may receive less attention—industrial workers, farmworkers, peasants, religious minorities, immigrants, LGBTQ+ communities, and others. Despite the seemingly dire state of the world today, people have accomplished countless impressive successes over the years.

Students could, for example, study the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP), which achieved numerous targeted victories designed to address the AIDS pandemic—more funding for research, new regulatory procedures for drugs, greater access to information on sexual practices, and an end to some forms of discrimination against people with AIDS.⁹ Or they could study how organizations of farmers in Honduras and Guatemala have fought against biotechnology companies pressuring them to replace traditional methods of farming with export-oriented commodity production, by creating seed banks and organizing to successfully demand repeal of industry-oriented restrictions on farming.¹⁰ Examples like these provide the basis for pragmatic hope—the belief that with the right strategies, people can preserve or enhance their lives.

Goals

Pragmatic goals are those that can be achieved in a reasonable time frame, even if they are ambitious—goals that are bounded and concrete, rather than grandiose or amorphous. When deliberating how to address present-day issues, teachers can select and frame problems in ways that are manageable in scale and scope: Not



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A group of Richmond Public School high schoolers visit the Virginia Oyster Shell Recycling Company, June 22, 2018. Recycled oyster shells can help restore and protect biodiversity.

“ending racism,” for example, but “reducing in-school suspensions for minoritized students” or “providing support for minority-owned businesses.” Similarly, rather than trying to address the perennial dilemma of global poverty, pragmatic hope would focus on a more targeted problem such as alleviating child hunger in a specific community. Students would not only be daunted by the sheer intractability and complexity of trying to end poverty, but they likely would also be demoralized by their inability to enact substantive changes. The latter goal is more limited but has a far greater likelihood of success.

Social movements provide countless examples of pragmatic goals. The Montgomery Bus Boycott did not aim to eradicate racism but to change a specific policy that sanctioned discrimination. Similarly, most labor actions have not aimed to bring about a workers’ revolution but to improve salary, benefits, and working conditions in particular industries. By helping students analyze the concrete goals of the social movements they

study, teachers can help them better understand what makes action feasible in specific circumstances.

Pathways

Pragmatic hope rests on an understanding of *how* to bring about change—the strategies that can be used, and the factors that affect success or failure. In studying concrete examples of social action, teachers can help students identify the political, economic, and social conditions that support or constrain decision-making and evaluate the advantages and limitations of plausible routes to achieve the goal. Young people often seem to believe that “raising awareness” is all it takes to change the world, but by learning about the day-to-day work of social action, they can better understand the variety of efforts necessary to turn goals into reality.

For example, students could study cases such as efforts to protect and restore the Louisiana Coastline, led by the Coalition to Restore Coastal



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Students participate in the annual Ocean Commotion event hosted by Louisiana Sea Grant to educate students about Louisiana's coastal and aquatic environments, 2021.

Louisiana. This coalition has collaborated with a range of local and national partners and has worked with political leaders and scientists to advocate for funding at local, state, and national levels; it has initiated a range of smaller-scale projects such as coordinating volunteers to replant native vegetation; and it has engaged both Indigenous groups and restaurant owners in using recycled oyster shells to create living shorelines and protect the coast and reefs—a practice that has been successful in controlling erosion in other locations.¹¹ By examining the concrete work of organizations such as this—in addition to their goals—students can better understand how to bring about change. Changing the world is never a simple process, and students need to consider what it takes to achieve specific outcomes, rather than being content with vague plans or ineffective gestures.

Visionary Hope

Alongside pragmatic hope, students need to develop *visionary* hope. Visionary hope looks to a world that may lie far beyond present day realities, a belief motivated by idealistic visions of relationships among people or between humans and the environment. This is big-picture thinking, not careful calculation of instrumental strategies for success. Visionary hope imagines a future that may be difficult to attain, of a different scope and time scale than pragmatic hope—but a future that is no less realistic.

Possibilities

At the core of visionary hope is a belief that the world can be very different than it is. This seems easy to say, but it can be more difficult to believe. Not only young people but adults often believe existing practices and institutions are so deeply embedded, even “natural,” that they cannot be changed.¹² Surely economic production must be driven by profit; gender roles must be dichotomous, differentiated, and unequal; environmental resources must be extracted for human use—hasn't it always been this way? If so, then imagining a better world seems futile.

Social education, though, can help students see that what is taken for granted does not have to be. This requires learning about other times and places when people have lived in very different ways than we may be familiar with. Students might, for example, study how artists and performers during the Harlem Renaissance created spaces that allowed for a range of gender expressions and sexual identities, even though those may have been short-lived or limited in scope.¹³ They could also learn how the relational and spiritual beliefs of the Menominee people, as well as their knowledge systems, have enabled them to maintain a healthy forest ecosystem while providing economic opportunities.¹⁴ Such different worlds are in fact possible, because they have existed and do exist.

These are just two of many examples that teachers might draw from to illustrate the plasticity of what we often mistakenly call “human nature.” Practically any geographic region or time period could include similar examples, if only we look for them. The purpose is not to hold any one example up as a source of imitation for students themselves, because times change and circumstances differ. The intent, rather, is to help students see the possibility of other ways of living, as a foundation for believing that even visionary hope is reasonable.

Goals

Whereas pragmatic hope entails looking at specific and actionable goals, visionary hope focuses on the grand ideals that people have held throughout history and today, whether these are less exploitive economic arrangements, more

equitable gender relations, greater harmony between nature and humanity, more fulfilling forms of social and cultural acceptance, or others. These are not narrow and bounded outcomes but visions of a world so different that existing social practices and structures no longer rule our lives.

For such visions to be meaningful, though, students must dive into their rationales and implications. It's not enough to know that someone like Aldo Leopold thought environmentalism was a good idea; after all, students already are likely to regard environmentalism positively. Instead, they need to understand what an environmentalist like Leopold thought this entailed—such as his ideas about wilderness, public habitat management, and ecological interdependence—and why these are important.¹⁵ Without a deeper and more complete understanding of visionary goals, students may fail to see what it would mean to apply them. And without exploring the rationales behind such goals, students may abandon their beliefs in the face of public opinion or self-interest. There is little point in believing in a better world if we are unwilling to do anything about it. Commitment depends—at least in part—on understanding *why* a different world is desirable.

Many periods and topics offer opportunities to explore those who have imagined a different world, whether specific individuals (e.g., Mary Wollstonecraft, W. E. B. Du Bois, Grace Lee Boggs, or many others) or movements (17th-century Diggers, 20th-century anarchists, the Black Panther Party, and so on). Exploring a range of visions is especially important for those that seem controversial or less familiar. It's easy to stereotype anarchy as simplistic or chaotic, for example, but exploring the tenets of anarchist philosophy can lead to a better appreciation of its relevance and application.¹⁶ Again, the goal is not to promote any one particular vision, but to help students thoughtfully consider a range of ways of thinking about societal arrangements, so that they can make more informed choices about their own goals.

Pathways

Visionary hope is closely related to utopian thinking, but *utopian* has gotten a bad reputation

as synonymous with “impossible.” Visionary hopes are indeed radical in their visions for society, but that should not be equated with a lack of possibility. Just as pragmatic hope involves consideration of strategies for success, visionary hope must engage students in thinking about how to achieve a different society. Helping students think through how to get from *here* to *there* is a corrective to feelings of inevitability.

This does not mean idle fantasies that such visions will come true overnight or result from a few protests or online postings. It means thinking through what steps might be necessary to work *toward* “utopia.” Mary Wollstonecraft did not imagine that society would suddenly create equal roles for women, or that her writing would transform the world; rather, she argued for greater educational opportunities for women, which would eventually lead to a recognition of their capabilities and might one day bring about greater equality. And expanded education for women *has* contributed to greater equality, although progress is uneven and there is still a long way to go. Similarly, the idea of climate justice may seem far out of reach, but decades of collective advocacy by small and developing nations has led to a global fund to provide compensation for the effects of climate change.¹⁷ We cannot say that the world is environmentally just—far from it—but a fund like this is one step along the way, and may pave the way for more progress in the future.

Cautions

Centering hope does not mean simplifying or romanticizing social change, whether past or present. Social movements are complicated, and their intricacies cannot be ignored in a misguided attempt to make them more inspirational. We cannot pretend that the U.S. civil rights movement was unified in its goals, that its work was linear and straightforward (much less easy), or that its efforts were uniformly successful. The same could be said for any social movement, and a key task for educators is to help students see such complexity. This requires all the intellectual skills we expect students to employ for any topic—looking at the complicated (and often unintended) consequences of social action;

analyzing the causes and consequences of action, not simply celebrating heroes and their victories; putting social change into historical and cultural perspective; and drawing well-informed conclusions from carefully-evaluated evidence. When we oversimplify efforts to create a better world, we may inadvertently leave students with *false hope*.

In addition, centering hope does not magically solve any of the problems of content selection that educators already face. Teachers still must decide *which* hopeful possibilities, goals, and pathways they want to emphasize. In itself, the idea of hope is content-neutral. The examples we have chosen derive from our own commitment to social justice and critical harmony, and we expect many teachers will share these beliefs.¹⁸ Some people in our society, though, hope for futures that are less democratic, more exclusionary, even more violent. As with any approach, teachers' underlying values will influence the content they choose to teach, and these values will always be subject to public scrutiny. Teaching for hope does make potential controversies go away; dedicated teachers still have to be ready to defend their choices.

Finally, hope must truly be *centered* in the curriculum, not an add-on that receives only occasional attention. Hope is a topic-specific belief, not an internal capacity that transfers easily across issues, and so occasional hopeful examples will have limited impact on students' imagination. Becoming more hopeful about increasing acceptance of sexual minorities, for example, does not automatically transfer to hopefulness about climate change or income inequality. Centering hope requires consistently and systematically studying hopeful prospects for addressing many different social issues, at a variety of scales and in different settings.

Conclusions

Despair is central to the thoughts and feelings of many people these days, whether young people or adults. In a world beset by violence, disease, hunger, poverty, and environmental crisis—and lacking political structures and public sentiments to address these meaningfully—many people see no way to move toward a better,

more just, more harmonious world. Schools must counter this sense of despair—not romantically, not simplistically, but forcefully. This means focusing our efforts to provide a foundation for both pragmatic and visionary hope: realistic and successful struggles to improve the world, and the idealistic visions that guide and motivate effective action. ■

Notes

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