Making hope happen in the classroom

Hopeful students are more successful in school, and educators can employ strategies to boost hopefulness in their students.

By Shane J. Lopez

My son and I do lots of nexting on our morning walks to his elementary school. We talk about his next big project at school, his next basketball game, the next movie we'll watch. Nexting thinking and talking about a desired future comes naturally to kids. I have never met a child who couldn't do it.

If all children are capable of nexting, which requires thinking about the future in a fairly complex way, then why are only half of American children hopeful, according to the Gallup Student Poll? Why does only one of every two children believe their future will be better than their present and believe that they have the power to make that future a reality?

We can answer these questions by focusing on the harsh realities of our modern world that we can do little about. Or, we can exercise our own hope as educators to teach children how to hope. That starts with a common understanding of what hope is and is not, why it is important, and how it works.

Three myths about future thinking

Hopeful thinking combines future thinking with a sense of agency or efficacy. While most teachers know the value of building personal efficacy, future thinking's role in student learning and development is not well understood. This may be due to our assumptions about daydreaming, motivation, and hope itself.

Daydreaming is bad for students. Thinking about the future is something children do naturally. When their minds wander they might reflect on the past or examine the present, but most of the time they're daydreaming about the future.

While teachers may interpret students' dreamy gazes as off-task behavior, they may be considering something inspired by the teacher, a peer's comment about a lesson, or a deep thought about how what they just learned in class relates to some other knowledge.

Daydreaming gives a child a chance to take a future for a test drive. It is where imagination sparks creativity and where plans and designs for the future are developed.

All goals are created equal. Through daydreaming, students entertain aims beyond school. With the help of others, students begin to sort through the images of the future, or goals, and decide where they want to devote their time and energy.

Not all goals are created equal. The most motivating student goals are the ones they own and find personally meaningful. What's salient to young people are the same goals that captivate most adults. Specifically, they want a good job. The image of having a good job pulls people through the years required to finish high school and undergraduate education. And they want that good job to provide security for the second outcome they're pursuing: a happy family. Although ideas about what a happy family looks like differ vastly from person to person, all covet an image of a group of people coexisting and helping one another in daily life. These goals — the good job and happy family — help young people overcome the rigors of high school and college. These expecta-

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tions, the foundations of a good life, are what draw students forward. Their goals motivate them.

Wishing is the same as hoping. Future thinking that is rich with imagery is a core ingredient of both hoping and wishing. If a child is thinking about a desirable outcome, she may be hopeful. Then again, she may be just wishing.

Both future visions are immediately self-reinforcing — priming the pleasure pump with thoughts about accomplishment and celebration. Both can also help individuals relax and buffer themselves against stress, anxiety, and other negative emotions.

The difference is that hopes are sustainable; wishes are not. Wishes are mental fast food. They are mind candy that satisfies for the moment, but do nothing to nourish us for the long haul. Distinguishing a wish from a hope is not always easy. The telltale sign of a wish is that its benefits are fleeting. Wishing is future thinking that sparks no action. Only hope starts an individual thinking about ways to make life better and gets them moving.

Why hope is important

More than 50 studies have examined the role of hope in predicting the performance of elementary, middle school, high school, and college students. In each, hope predicted test scores and term GPA. In many studies, hope was a significant predictor of student success even when controlling for previous grades, intelligence, and other psychological variables (like engagement, optimism, and self-efficacy). The takeaway from all the studies is that, other conditions being equal, hope leads to a 12% bump in school outcomes.

While a great deal of research has been done with K-12 students, the most compelling evidence for the added value of hope comes from four longitudinal studies of college students. These long-term studies give us the opportunity to assess how the passage of time influences the link between hope and academic success.

For the longitudinal studies, researchers recruited first-semester college students to complete a standardized measure of hope along with other scales, and requested access to their personal school records for some years to come. Researchers then unobtrusively followed the students by examining academic records each term or so. Statistical models were used to determine the relationship between hope and outcomes such as GPA, ongoing enrollment, and graduation. Each study controlled for the other determinants of school success, such as GPA at previous academic levels and entrance exam scores. The main finding is clear: How students think about the future predicts benchmarks of academic progress and success, including how many courses they enroll in, how many credits they earn, their GPA across those courses, their cumulative GPA, and the likelihood that they'll gradu-

ate. Of note, one study showed that low-hope students are three times more likely to be dismissed from school for poor grades. Another study, which pitted hope against ACT scores, found that hope is a better predictor of ongoing enrollment and graduation than this standardized entrance exam.

Three things hopeful students do differently

Drawing upon my research and findings from studies around the world, I found that hopeful students have at least three characteristics that make them more successful than other students.

Hopeful students are excited about the future. Children need something to hope for. They need to be excited about one thing in the future . . . then another, then another. That one thing can be big or small, novel or run-of-the-mill, close at hand or far in the future — as long as it teaches them to look forward with positive expectation. The content hardly matters (a weekly visit to the park, a family trip, a sporting event, a school dance) as long as thoughts about it are energizing to the young person.

Hopeful students create and sustain enthusiasm about their future lives. They talk with excitement about their future selves. With vivid descriptions of the goals they want to accomplish as they grow older, they become better at marshaling and aiming their resources so they can make progress. They become more animated and this display of positive emotions attracts attention and support from people who can help them along the way.

Hopeful students go to school. Absenteeism is one of the biggest problems facing American schools. Researchers refer to missing lots of school as a canary in the coal mine, an early indicator that students will struggle academically and possibly drop out. The data show that by 3rd grade, children who missed too much of kindergarten and 1st grade are falling behind in reading. By 6th grade, chronic absence increases the likelihood that students will drop out of high school.

Unexcused absences spike when students enter high school, have more freedom, and start to make up their own minds about the value of school in general and of certain subjects in particular. Mike Wortman, the longtime principal of Lincoln High School in Lincoln, Neb., confirmed that missing school in the freshman year is one of his best predictors that a student will drop out. That's why my Gallup colleagues and I took a close look at the school-going behavior of a large group of Principal Wortman's freshmen. We measured the hope of

students as they entered 9th grade then we followed them, collecting attendance data periodically. Students with high hope missed only two days of school during their first school term; low-hope students missed more than twice as many.

Hopeful students are engaged at school. When students are engaged at school, they are psychologically invested in what is happening around them. They are active participants in the learning process, eager to gain and apply new knowledge and skills.

Most hopeful students are engaged at school. According to the Gallup Student Poll, nearly three of four students who are hopeful about the future are also involved in and enthusiastic about school. These two student states, hope and engagement, seem to work together to help students achieve daily and long-term goals.

How hope works

Hope is not simply an attitude or belief that benefits us in some mysterious way. Hope can lift our spirits, buoy our energy, and make life seem worth living. But it also changes our day-to-day behavior. How we think about the future has a direct influence on what we do today. This is nicely illustrated in a psychology experiment designed by two educational researchers, Mesmin Destin and Daphna Oyserman, who examined the link between students' future thinking and their behavioral choices.

To prime two groups of 7th-grade science students in Detroit — 295 students in all — to think about the future, the researchers sent a counselor (actually a research assistant pretending to be an academic recruiter) from the University of Michigan to the middle school to talk about college and careers. He spoke to two groups (to which classes of students were assigned randomly) and presented a slide show about the university, the campus, and college majors. The second part of the talk featured real-world data about adult earnings. One group saw a graph describing the step-wise increase in salary by level of education in Michigan. The second group saw a graph summarizing the earnings of actors, athletes, and musicians on the 2008 Forbes Celebrity 100 list.

Once the classroom presentations were over, the science teachers (who had not attended and hence were considered "blind" to the experiment) gave students an extra-credit homework assignment related to information covered in their regular science class.

The students in the first group, who were shown an explicit link between education and income, were nearly eight times more likely than the second group to complete and turn in the optional assignment the next day. Eight times. It's as if they suddenly saw edu-

cation as a real path to the good future they wanted. Knowing the way to a solid job that paid $50,000 a year gave these 12- and 13-year-olds more energy and guidance for current effort than all the fantasy fortunes of Jay-Z, LeBron James, and other icons they followed on TV.

Talking with Destin helped me realize that there is a distinction between thinking that you're college-bound (an idea that we now drum into kids) and realizing that your success in life depends on how well you do in school today. When students see a direct connection between the future they want and their attitudes and behaviors today, their commitment and effort soar. They psychologically invest in the future, and it pays off today. That is the how of hope.

Three ways to make hope happen

In *Making Hope Happen*, I describe dozens of strategies designed to enhance hope. Here are three practical ways to help students discover and shape their future selves.

Ask students to work on goals that really matter to them. Have you ever washed a rental car? Most people say that they have never done so and would never do so. Why? They don't own the car, so they don't feel responsible for it.

Most students don't give their all on assignments they don't own or find meaningful. This shouldn't come as much of a surprise, since we, the adults, don't like it when someone assigns us a task, either. No middle school student wakes up squealing with glee, "I get to raise the school district's reading scores today!" No college student in America jumps out of bed and says, "Today, I will do my part to raise the graduation rate at my school!" They don't care about institutional goals. They're excited about personal goals that create a promising future for themselves. Educators' work is to do all they can to make sure that the present prepares them for it.

Goals that are clearly linked to one day having a good job or a happy family inspire students to do their best. Knowing students well enough to know their visions of their future selves is required to sufficiently motivate them.

Teach students "where there's a way, there's will." Students generally are confident and think "I can do anything!" According to a 2003 study by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, American kids are No. 1 in the world in confidence. For the most part, students have adequate will and say they are determined to put in the hard work to pursue a future they're excited about.

The big problem is that they lack the ways or

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necessary strategies to reach the big goals such as graduation and employment. According to the Gallup Student Poll, more than 90% strongly believe they would graduate from high school, but only 60% of them strongly believe they could come up with many ways to get good grades. Nearly half of American students strongly believe they would find a good job after graduation, but only a third of them strongly believe they could find ways around any problem that might arise in life.

My all-time favorite way to teach the ways of hope is to do it on the sly before people realize I'm working hard to get them to think more strategically about the future. I use the Hope Camera Project, which was originally developed for use in a children's hospital and then adapted for use in a school-based hope program. A description of a recent application of the Hope Camera Project illustrates how a project-based assignment can teach ways of hope.

School counselor Jennifer Magnuson-Stessman gave her 5th and 6th graders, 36 in all, disposable cameras and a week to document hope in their lives. She enticed them into action by promising to display their work at a community art show for their friends, family, educators, and other community members.

Magnuson-Stessman kicked off the project by laying out the steps that would lead the students to a fun and rewarding night at the art opening. First, each student captured images of hope in their daily lives in 28 photos. In consultation with Magnuson-Stessman, they picked one photo that best represented hope to them. Next, they wrote a brief essay, to be edited and reedited with her to tell their story. Finally, the students printed the photos, cropped them, matted and framed them, hung them along with their essay, then rehearsed for the art show.

Magnuson-Stessman walked each student through each step. She nudged them to think about multiple ways to make the progress they wanted. Then one night in April 2011, hope was on display during the art show in the school gym. My wife, Alli, and I attended the unveiling with about 100 school officials, students, and family members who sampled apple juice in wine glasses with fresh strawberries and cubed cheese. As Alli and I viewed the photos, read the essays, and chatted with students, we realized that some of them had considered their project to be a harbinger of hope over the course of the past winter and spring. Family strife struck most, academic struggles slowed down many, and health problems plagued several students or their siblings. No matter what students were grappling with, they had "the project." We were impressed by their ability to figure out how to get things done and experienced a palpable sense of hope that night — a feeling that I remember fondly today.

The Hope Camera Project is just one way we can teach people how to match their will with their ways. Once students learn how to think flexibly and create alternative strategies to reach their goals, they can use this skill for a lifetime.

Show students how to set action triggers. A when/where plan uses the power of cues to prompt us to work on the long-term projects that matter most to us. A good when/where plan keeps us on track, guards us against our tendency to procrastinate, and prevents us from getting overwhelmed by competing demands.

New York University psychology professor Peter Gollwitzer has developed this strategy through a series of research studies, most notably through two I'll call the Christmas Studies. In Christmas Study #1, college students were asked before Christmas break to name two projects, one easy and one hard, that they intended to complete during their time off. Typical goals included writing papers, mending relationships with friends, and exercising. About two-thirds of them, with no encouragement, formed plans about when and where to get started on the project. Upon returning from Christmas vacation, participants were asked about project completion. Most of the easy projects were completed regardless of whether the student had made a when/where plan. But hard projects were a different story. Only 25% of students who did not develop when/where plans in advance completed their hard projects.

In Christmas Study #2, all participants were given the same project: They were to write a report on how they spent Christmas Eve and submit it within two days of returning from the holiday. Individuals were then randomly assigned to two groups. One group was asked to create when/where plans for writing the essay; the other was not. Seventy-five percent of the group who had visited the future to specify the time and place for writing the report submitted it on time; only 33% of those without a plan completed the project.

Making a when/where plan is a straightforward process. Each time, give a student an assignment or set a goal, help them choose the day and time they'll start working on it, and the place where they'll work.

Spreading hope to students

Most students can go from nexting to hope with a little help from teachers and other caregivers. Not only can we teach them how to hope, but we also can inspire it in them. That's because hope is contagious. It can be spread from one person to another. In a classroom setting, all that is required to create a contagion is a teacher being at the height of hope. **K**