The Power of Hope in Student Learning

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"You don't lose hope love. If you do, you lose everything." -Mrs. Potts

In 1957, Curt Richter, a professor at Johns Hopkins University, published a report on his findings of an experiment he did dealing with rats and their resiliency to death. Today these experiments would be protested by animal rights activists or even banned, and rightly so. And while I absolutely do not condone the experiment itself, the results do show hope is an essential element to perseverance and resilience.

Richter was curious to know how long a rat would swim in a bucket of water before it would give up and drown. Again, not the best ethical experiment. He first took 12 domesticated rats and placed them in the buckets of water. Three of the 12 rats died within a matter of a few minutes. The other nine continued to swim, with some of them living for days before they finally succumb.

Richter then brought in 34 wild rats which were well known to be excellent swimmers, spending much time in the sewers. They had only recently been caught and were still very aggressive. Richter hypothesized these wild rats would fight to survive much more than the domesticated rats. He placed them into the buckets and to his surprise, within minutes of entering the water, all thirty-four died.

Why had the vast majority of the rats given up so quickly?

Richter pondered this question and decided that hope was the reason, or rather, hopelessness.

In his own words he said: "The situation of these rats scarcely seems one demanding fight or flight—it is rather one of hopelessness…the rats are in a situation against which they have no defense…they seem literally to 'give up.'"

With the idea of hope now on his mind, Richter decided to continue the experiment. He took rats of similar characteristics and placed them in the buckets of water just as he had done before. This time however, at the moment the rat gave up and started to sink, he would reach in and rescue the animal. He would then hold them for a little bit, dry them off, let them recover, and then place them back into the water. He believed by introducing the idea of hope to the rats, that they would in fact be rescued if things became too hard, the amount of time the rats would continue to fight to swim would increase.

As he measured how long the rats swam after being rescued, he was excited to discover his hypothesis was indeed correct. The rats did swim for longer, much longer, days in fact. After originally giving up in just a matter of minutes the first time, after being rescued, they then swam for days.

Richter wrote: "…the rats quickly learn that the situation is not actually hopeless" and that "after elimination of hopelessness the rats do not die."

So, while interesting, what does this experiment have to do with schools and student learning? Well first, it is absolutely true humans and rats are not the same. Yet, I believe we can glean some very valuable information from this when it comes to hope and the power it has in the classroom, and conversely, the negative power and influence hopelessness can have on student learning if we are not careful. When a student has hope they can learn, they can improve, and have success in a classroom. Students will keep fighting and persevere even when curriculum is new, rigorous, and even unexciting. When they don't have any hope of success, they won't.

Now, I know what some of you might be thinking, Bryce, you're right, rats and students (or faculty, which is a completely different article) aren't the same. Humans are much smarter and more complex and we just can't compare the two. If we rescue students every time things get hard, we'll be creating "learned helplessness" where they'll give up every time the going gets a bit tough and expect us to swoop in and save them. Safety nets aren't the answer when it comes to improving student learning.

If that is your thought right now (or if you're expecting that idea to be thrown at you if you were to ever bring this up to your staff), let me remind you of the experiment again. Richter introduced hope, but the rats still did the work. He didn't pour out the water. He didn't build ladders. The rats still had to swim. But he eliminated hopelessness.

I'm not sure there is anything more destructive to student learning than hopelessness. Once a student feels there is no hope to be successful, they will give up, and it can be almost impossible to get them back on track. I have seen it time and time again where a student completely stops trying once they feel there is no hope. I have yet to see a situation where a student stops trying when hope still exists (except when there are much larger life issues going on they are dealing with). As administrators we've probably all had students sent to our offices because of misbehavior in the classroom, and when we are able to get right down to the heart of things, the reason they were acting out was due to a feeling of hopelessness with some

aspect in the classroom. Typically, it's because their grade is so low, they've realized it's impossible to recover (if you've ever worked in a secondary school this is extremely common). In education, a feeling of hopelessness can show up among students in many places. I'll talk more specifically later on in the article.

We must build structures of hope into our districts, school buildings, and classrooms to eliminate hopelessness traps. But, before we get into specifics, let's make sure we understand just what hope is and what it isn't. Hope is not making our students and parents always happy and doing whatever they ask of us. Hope also isn't crossing our fingers or wishing on a star. Shane Lopez, in his book, *Making Hope Happen: Create the Future You Want for Yourself and Others* defines hope as "the belief that the future will be better than present combined with the belief that you have the power to make it so!" (Lopez, 2013).

For our schools, it's creating environments where student success flourishes because all students believe their tomorrow will be better than their today and they have the ability to make it happen. It means building student self-efficacy by guiding them along the basic pathways to success (reading, writing, math, etc.) and then supporting them as they create their own path to a future bright with personal accomplishments.

Ok Bryce, but that still sounds a bit fluffy, what does that really look like in schools? Well, first as a district, building, or individual, you must take a full assessment of your current practices and determine if there are any hopelessness traps. Are there things happening that, without you realizing it, are creating hopelessness with your students? Policies or procedures that create an environment where students find themselves with no way forward once they've hit a wall, and/or no way to fix a mistake if they did something wrong.

Analyze hopelessness traps in areas such as:
- Discipline policies and procedures
- Grading practices, including homework, assessments, late work penalties, make-up work and zeros
- Curriculum rigor and pace
- Clarity and effectiveness of instruction
- Availability of supports (academic and emotional) if needed…and the answer can't be to get help from another student
- Adult and student interactions and relationships
- Feedback
- Communication between the school and home
- Child find, data collection, as well as IEP goal progress
- Interventions

If you discover the potential for hopelessness in any of these areas, work as a team to come up with solutions. It won't be easy. I promise you there will be resistance. Some of these hopelessness traps have been in schools for decades, perhaps even centuries, and they won't

go quietly into the night. And let's be honest here, the real reason why people don't want to give up some of these practices is not because it prepares students for the "real world," but because they create more work for the educator. Allowing retakes, giving specific (even face-to-face) academic feedback, allowing for students to show learning by ways other than a multiple-choice test, all take time to do. We need to accept and recognize time and effort as the real culprit holding us all back from fixing some of these hopelessness traps and then devote time and effort to solve these issues for teachers also. So, be ready, there will be resistance, yet we must eliminate hopelessness in our schools before we can start to build hope.

Let's talk hope. Going back to Mr. Lopez's wonderful definition of hope, "the belief that the future will be better than present combined with the belief that you have the power to make it so!", it's the second part I'd like to focus on. How can we as educators create an environment where students feel they have the power to make a better future?

As I've thought back to some of the greatest instructors I've ever had personally or that I've had the pleasure to work with, I can say each of them were able to develop environments of hope in their classroom. The first thing they did was create a vision of what the future could be. For students to develop hopeful thinking, they must have a clear picture of what their better future-self looks, feels, and acts like. At the elementary level this can be trickier at the younger levels, yet not impossible. The more we can get our students to visualize their future-selves the better. I have seen some teachers use this as a writing assignment, and while I always love and encourage writing, we don't want this to be seen as an assignment as much as a personal goal and vision. This is all about them who they want to become. We want to them to see it. Feel it. Hear it. Even taste it. Desire to become it. And most essential, this cannot be a single assignment/discussion/event and then never spoken of again. For hope to "spring eternal" it must be reminded eternally. The teacher, other students, administrators, parents, need to be fully aware and fully invested. When I was a principal at the secondary level, I loved having the College and Career Ready meetings with the students, parents and counselors. They were so future focused and so hopeful in their tone. I've often wondered about setting something up similar, maybe starting in 3rd or 4th grade, with our Parent-Teacher conferences, just because everyone would then start talking about the future dreams, desires and yes, hopes of that student. It's so essential our students, at a young age, begin to visualize, their hopeful future.

Once students have a more clear understanding of what and where they want to go, schools and classrooms can more easily help those students make connections to how the curriculum has purpose and supports them as they move toward their hopeful future. Inevitably, we will be asked how this lesson/curriculum will help a student in their future, and if you can't find a reason…well, that's a problem. As you are continually building and reassessing your school's power standards and curriculum, if you can't see how the two-week Columbus Day unit fits, perhaps it's time to sail the Niña, Pinta, and Santa Maria into lesson plan retirement. Too harsh? But you see, the beauty of education is how it all fits together when done correctly.

Student hope, along with school scope and sequence should fit hand in glove. Hope isn't something that happens instantly, or even overnight. It grows and matures. And it's so

important that the education system be flexible enough to change and evolve too. Each student is different. Therefore, each situation is a bit different. Each classroom is bit different. Each school. Each school year. And while it's absolutely true hope isn't the same for everyone everywhere, some aspects of hope can, and should, be taught and developed.

<u>Here are a few things we can do in a school/classroom to help develop hope with our students:</u>
- Communicate learning outcomes clearly, concisely, and connect them to the future
- Teach students how to learn, how to study, how to be successful on tasks and what good work looks like
- Teach students accountability and boundaries while being consistent, fair, and compassionate
- Help students develop individualized ways to show mastery of learning
- Treat all students with respect and build trust by showing integrity
- Coach students through difficult situations teaching them how to problem solve and find solutions themselves

As you and your team went through and looked for hopelessness traps, you can now build, or look for preexisting, Hope Pathways. Create processes, built into your everyday way of doing things, where students will know where they can turn if things turn bleak. Anything you found that created hopelessness, fix it. How can you build hope into your grading practices? What about discipline? What about adult and student interactions? And once you have come up with your amazing solutions, how will you introduce them to your faculty? How about your students? All your stakeholders? How will you follow-up to ensure it's happening? Is there some sort of analytic you could use to measure improvement? Can you see an improvement in student learning? Could this also effect other areas such as climate? What could be the negative effects? How will you celebrate if things do improve? These are all questions you'll want to be thinking about.

If you do this with your team, whoever they may be, I promise you it will lead to some powerful discussions. You may have realized it already, but this article, these discussions with your team or faculty, and the idea of eliminating Hopelessness Traps and creating Hope Pathways in schools in fact, Hope. It is my hope. And while I do believe that schools provide hope for so many students, there are still too many buckets filled with water that we must root out and eliminate forever and replace them all with beautiful hope-filled paths.

Ultimately, all living things need hope. It is bright. It is powerful. It is the dawn just as night gets to be its darkest. Without hope we would all fail eventually. Let us build hope in our structures. In our policies. In our procedures. In our schools. In our classrooms. In our learning. In our teachers. And, most importantly, let us build hope in our students.