

## ***Bridging Definitions: Looking Across Research Paradigms to Cultivate Hope***

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Common use of the word “hope” gives it a feeling of abstractness. People casually toss about the word “hope” in daily conversation, and everyone seems to feel that they view hope in the same way. However, despite implicitly seeming to understand what hope is, people often struggle when asked to directly define hope.

Often, their definitions tend to be circular in nature and fail to meaningfully illuminate what hope is and how it functions. When they are more direct, they define hope in an abstract manner, one that gives it a nebulous sort of connotation and that fails to operationalize it in our everyday lives. In some cases, people speak of hope synonymously with optimism. With such definitions, it is difficult to understand where hope comes from, whether it is intrinsic or learned, and, if learnable, how it might be taught or cultured.

In order to gain a greater understanding of hope, I will begin by exploring two prominent understandings of hope—that of positive psychology and that of pragmatist philosophy—elucidating their differences and similarities. In particular, I aim to show how these two frameworks codify hope into a series of concepts that, combined, might depict a hope that can be cultivated in children.

## **Defining Hope**

Much of the research about hope comes from positive psychology, particularly from the work of C.R. Snyder, who is credited with developing hope theory and operationalizing hope. Positive psychology seeks to move away from focusing on the pathological aspects of illness. Instead, positive psychology endeavors to shift focus toward prevention of psychological illness by studying and promoting the ways in which people can live happily and successfully. It is therefore, in essence, a branch of psychology focused on helping people create conditions in their environment that allow them to improve themselves. According to Snyder, hope is defined as “the perceived capability to derive pathways to desired goals, and motivate oneself via agency thinking to use those pathways.”<sup>111</sup>

***To pragmatist philosophers, hope is both more action-oriented and social in nature.***

There are two key components to this definition. The first is the ability to derive pathways to goals. An individual must be confident that a way to the end goal either exists or can be constructed. The second component, equally important as the first, is that the individual must be motivated to use the pathways once they are discovered or created. This second component is particularly important in connecting the positive psychology definition of hope to the second definition, that of pragmatist philosophy.

To pragmatist philosophers, hope is both more action-oriented and social in nature. Pragmatists define hope as identifying end-goals, taking actions to achieve those goals, switching to a new strategy for achieving the goal if one fails, all while allowing for critical

<sup>111</sup> C. R. Snyder, “Hope Theory: Rainbows in the Mind,” *Psychological Inquiry* 13, no. 4 (2002): 249.

reflection and growth.<sup>112</sup> As a philosophy, pragmatism asserts that truth is based on empirical evidence (i.e. if it works, then it's true). Rather than using thought as a way to describe or reflect reality, pragmatism uses thought as a tool for action and change through problem solving and application.

The pragmatist definition of hope, while similar to that of positive psychology, differs in three key ways. First, the means of achieving goals, and the goals themselves, are flexible and can be exchanged for other pathways if they fail. Second, the goals an individual typically selects are not oriented only toward the self, but toward the betterment of the world as a whole.<sup>113</sup> Pragmatist hope requires an individual to look outside of the self and consider all aspects of their environment. Finally, pragmatism strives toward living in a state of hope, which gives one a sense of belonging to others and the world.<sup>114</sup> Most significant about this final aspect is that it allows individuals to start with small goals and gradually move on to larger and larger goals, demonstrating that hope grows stronger through repeated and habitual use, reflection, and experimentation.

## The Role of Goals

As previously discussed, both the positive psychological and the pragmatist philosophical definitions of hope deal with goals and the ways in which they are attained. Where they differ is in the types of goals and how those goals are achieved. By examining in detail the types of goals each presents, it is possible to see how they can work together.

According to C.R. Snyder, humans are naturally goal-directed, and goals occupy much of

our attention throughout the day.<sup>115</sup> Goal-directed thoughts are comprised of two components: cognitive willpower or energy to achieve a goal, called the agency component, and the perceived ability to create routes to achieve the goals, called the pathways component.<sup>116</sup> Carefully reading this description of goal-directed thoughts shows that it is remarkably similar to his definition of hope—and that one can therefore define hope as the employment of goal-directed thoughts.

The agency component is what actually motivates an individual to start acting to achieve a goal and to maintain the chosen path to that goal.<sup>117</sup> Agentic thinking is what helps individuals to navigate obstacles and continue along a path toward the goal. It can be instinctual or unplanned (e.g., the bed needs to be made, so I make it) or highly planned (e.g., I want to earn a degree and so I have to take these classes). Because the agency component is associated with navigating obstacles, it has also come to be associated, at least peripherally, with grit.

Grit is “perseverance and passion for long-term goals.”<sup>118</sup> It involves working past obstacles and failures and maintaining the chosen path, no matter how long it takes to achieve the goal. In this sense, it is a “pick yourself up by the boot straps” mentality. Grit, however, is not usually used in reference to short-term goals or more subjective goals (e.g., being a good parent).<sup>119</sup> Despite this restriction, it is rapidly gain-

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<sup>112</sup> Stephen Fishman and Lucille McCarthy. *John Dewey and the Philosophy and Practice of Hope*. (Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 4.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

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<sup>115</sup> C.R. Snyder. “Conceptualizing, Measuring, and Nurturing Hope.” *Journal of Counseling and Development* 73, no. 3 (Jan 1995): 355.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>117</sup> David B. Feldman and C.R. Snyder. “Hope and the Meaningful Life: Theoretical and Empirical Associations Between Goal-Directed Thinking and Life Meaning.” *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 24, no.3 (May 2005): 407.

<sup>118</sup> Angela L. Duckworth, Christopher Peterson, Michael D. Matthews, and Dennis R. Kelly. “Grit: Perseverance and Passion for Long-Term Goals.” *Personality Processes and Individual Differences* 92, no. 6 (2007): 1087.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 1088.

ing a following as a necessary, non-cognitive quality of character—needed in order to be an active citizen in local and global communities, particularly for those in leadership positions.<sup>120</sup>

Note that, if the agency component is used alone, the individual is only thinking about the goal and the ways in which to achieve it. Hence, the need for the pathways component, which requires a perception that pathways to the goal do in fact exist or can be created.<sup>121</sup> However, it is also the action of working toward the goal along a given pathway.<sup>122</sup> Without this component, one might despair that there is no way to achieve the desired goal. These components are intimately connected and vital to the function of hope. Use of each in concert with the other is necessary to exhibit hope in a balanced, meaningful way.

According to pragmatist philosophy, each person works toward a series of goals called ends-in-view. These goals, which can range from complex and dynamic to fairly simple, create a space for critical reflection and self-learning. Ends-in-view are flexible and pave the pathway for the realization of larger and larger goals. Often, the ends-in-view may actually begin to shape larger goals before they are even identified.

For example, a person whose goal is to become a physician is not born wanting to be a physician. Throughout childhood, various events, environmental factors, and social factors lead to a series of smaller goals that eventually lead to the identification of the larger goal. As each end-in-view is attained, it becomes a means for wider and wider thinking

about the future. Further ends-in-view are created in order to reach a larger goal. The realization of these ends-in-view in moving toward realization of larger goals results in a state of “living in hope.”<sup>123</sup> Throughout life, an individual may create multiple larger goals, reflecting the flexibility and fluidity inherent in the pragmatist view of hope.

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As noted previously, pragmatist philosophy defines a hope in which the goals, and the paths toward achieving them, are flexible. The key to goals, in this sense, is that they change—all based on the needs of the individual and their environment. In this way, goals can become more focused on social aspects and, in particular, social reforms.

To summarize, goals, according to positive psychology, require both the ability to see or create ways of attaining a valued end and the ability to actively follow a selected path toward attaining it. According to this conceptualization, individuals pursue their own goals in a way that maximizes the chance of attaining the goal—with little regard about how such actions might affect other individuals.<sup>124</sup>

<sup>120</sup> Erik K. Laursen. “The Power of Grit, Perseverance, and Tenacity.” *Reclaiming Children and Youth* 23, no. 4 (Winter 2015): 20.

<sup>121</sup> David B. Feldman and C.R. Snyder. “Hope and the Meaningful Life: Theoretical and Empirical Associations Between Goal-Directed Thinking and Life Meaning.” *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 24, no.3 (May 2005): 406.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Stephen Fishman and Lucille McCarthy. *John Dewey and the Philosophy and Practice of Hope*. (Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 4.

<sup>124</sup> C.R. Snyder. “Conceptualizing, Measuring, and Nurturing Hope.” *Journal of Counseling and Development* 73, no. 3 (Jan 1995): 359.

It is in this that we see the key difference between the hope defined by positive psychology and the hope defined by pragmatist philosophy: the former utilizes goals that are potentially ego-centric and almost narcissistic in nature,<sup>125</sup> while the latter seeks goals that are directed outward toward the community and environment—for the betterment of all as part of the betterment of the self.<sup>126</sup> Pragmatist hope relies on goals that build on each other and interact with one another on the path toward the building of a life's purpose.

### Dispositions and Habits

Another key difference in the way in which hope is defined and facilitated according to these two views is whether hope is dispositional or a habit. A disposition is “the usual attitude of a person” or “a tendency to act or think in a certain way.”<sup>127</sup> In contrast, a habit is “a behavior pattern acquired by frequent repetition.”<sup>128</sup>

In general, positive psychology classifies hope as a disposition, because it is derived from goal-directed thinking which is, as previously stated, an intrinsic part of human nature. According to positive psychologists, hope is a natural part of the human experience and, consequently, we naturally fall into employing hope. Snyder describes hope as a sort of lens through which individuals can focus on achieving their goals.<sup>129</sup>

When describing hope as a disposition, we accept that it is always present and employable as an intrinsic part of our natures. When one component is, for some reason, compromised, it functions less, but it never fails to function completely. Without even realizing it, we fall back on hope again and again throughout each day, endlessly employing it to accomplish even the smallest of goals.

**... rather than being born essentially hopeful, one learns and develops hope over time. Hope is nurtured, requiring the development of a specific set of skills and outlooks to develop and achieve its potential. From this one derives John Dewey's idea of “living in hope” or “ultimate hope.”**

However, using hope does not necessarily mean that it is used correctly or efficiently. When positive psychologists target hope as a source of treatment for certain conditions, they are focusing on teaching the individual to become aware of the activation of the hope process and to modify the process as necessary to achieve a desired outcome.<sup>130</sup>

In contrast, pragmatist philosophy classifies hope largely as a habit, implying that it is learned by repetition and trial-and-error, arising naturally from these processes. This means that, rather than being born essentially hopeful, one learns and develops hope over time. Hope is nurtured, requiring the development of a specific set of skills and outlooks to develop and

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.; Stephen Fishman and Lucille McCarthy. *John Dewey and the Philosophy and Practice of Hope*. (Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 95.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> "Disposition." Merriam-Webster.com. Accessed September 10, 2016. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/disposition>.

<sup>128</sup> "Habit." Merriam-Webster.com. Accessed September 10, 2016. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/habit>.

<sup>129</sup> C.R. Snyder. "Conceptualizing, Measuring, and Nurturing Hope." *Journal of Counseling and Development* 73, no. 3 (Jan 1995): 359.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 358.

achieve its potential.<sup>131</sup> From this one derives John Dewey's idea of "living in hope" or "ultimate hope."<sup>132</sup>

Fishman and McCarthy outline the aspects of hope as a habit comprised of three key components: "gratitude, intelligent wholeheartedness, and enriched present experience."<sup>133</sup> The gratitude here referenced is directed toward ancestors (history) and nature (the world around us). This gives us a sense of both belonging and of purpose, both a temporal and physical sense of who and what we are, and of who and what we might become. This component is how we identify what can be improved and how, based on the improvements that were brought about by our predecessors. This is particularly true, for example, of those individuals whose ultimate goal is some form of social reform.<sup>134</sup>

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Intelligent wholeheartedness may be thought of as a type of optimism, but it is a much more dynamic and supportive concept. It "offers the faith or reassurance that our goals are worthwhile and that we are doing our best to reach them."<sup>135</sup> It shifts focus away from what cannot be controlled (i.e., consequences of reform) and toward those things which can be controlled (i.e., planning, action, and critical reflection on our efforts).<sup>136</sup>

Put another way, it is our commitment to seeing a goal accomplished, and in this way is similar to the agency pathway described in positive psychology and, in some sense, to the concept of grit. Rather than being optimistic that events will work out for the better, intelligent wholeheartedness assures us that our efforts to see our goals to fruition are worthwhile and keeps us determined to work toward them.

The final component of hope as described by Fishman and McCarthy is enriched present experience. At first glance, this seems to contradict the other components by pulling the focus to the present and away from the past or future. However, it is in fact an integration of past, present, and future that results in us being "fully alive in the sense of being totally involved in present activity."<sup>137</sup> In this state, the future goal directs present activity. Present activity itself becomes a goal and thus results in a sense of fulfillment, while the past can be used as a way of observing efforts to achieve other goals, whether successful or unsuccessful, or in understanding how present goals are a continuation of a series of goals. As such, rather than contradicting the first two components, enriched present experience actually ties the other two together and illustrates how hope is a habit attained over time.

Once again, it is clear that, despite differences in definition, there are similarities to the ways in which positive psychology and pragmatist philosophy define hope. These similarities may serve to generate an understanding of how they might work together to create a form of hope that is of particular importance to the consideration of educators. If we are born with the ability to use hope to achieve our goals, as positive psychology says, and if hope can be learned, as pragmatist philosophy says, then it is important to identify the ways in which educators can take hold of our natural use of hope and develop it into something stronger. As a

<sup>131</sup> Stephen Fishman and Lucille McCarthy. *John Dewey and the Philosophy and Practice of Hope*. (Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 95.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

habit, hope can be taught and developed, resulting in a generation of people dedicated to the betterment of themselves and society, equipped to tackle many of the issues that face both local and global societies.

## Studies of Hope

As a science, positive psychology is driven to evaluate statements based on the evidence derived from observation and experimental design. Consequently, many studies have been carried out in an attempt to illuminate the concept of hope and to support or modify Snyder's hope theory. These studies also help to illuminate how hope functions at varying age levels and within varying social groups, and an analysis of such studies can help to emphasize the importance of introducing hope curriculum in schools.

Presented here are a selection of such studies that support various aspects and components of hope, each of which demonstrates that hope can, in the appropriate circumstances, be learned. These studies are representative of the body of research on hope, and allow a few generalizations to be made regarding the integration of hope into school curricula.

One of the core ideas of hope theory is that positive emotion results when barriers to a goal are encountered and overcome, and negative emotion results when barriers to a goal are encountered and not overcome.<sup>138</sup> The association of a positive emotional response to the overcoming of a barrier serves as a kind of buffer when further barriers are encountered. In fact, this phenomenon, called resilience, seems to serve as a source of strength and further success for

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<sup>138</sup> C.R. Snyder, Jennifer Cheavens, and Susie C. Symptom. "Hope: An Individual Motive for Social Commerce." *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice* 1, no. 2 (Jun 1997): 108.

an individual.<sup>139</sup> Hope is often seen as a part of resilience, because the experience of hope helps to foster resilience in an individual.

Particularly in the case of students of color, barriers have been found to play a key role in the development of hope. Many such adolescents face a wide array of stressors, including community distress, poverty and economic inequality, and exposure to violence, discrimination, and racism.<sup>140</sup> Resiliency serves as a way of shifting focus away from these barriers and instead on the strengths of individuals and how they can overcome them.<sup>141</sup> Interestingly, despite facing tremendous barriers, African American adolescents tend to report higher hope levels than their White counterparts.<sup>142</sup> This may be related to a strong ethnic or racial identification, which has been linked to self-esteem.<sup>143</sup>

Other studies have sought to examine how dispositional hope affects coping mechanisms of adolescents, particularly among communities of color. In general, high hope individuals employ direct coping strategies, like problem solving, planning, and positive thinking, instead of

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<sup>139</sup> Jessica B. McClintock. "Hope Among Resilient African American Adolescents." (PhD Diss, Marquette University, May 2015), 3.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 1.; Keri J. Brown Kirschman, Michael C. Roberts, Joanna O. Shadlow, and Terri J. Pelley. "An Evaluation of Hope Following a Youth Summer Camp for Inner-City Youth." *Child and Youth Care Forum* 39, no. 6 (December 2010): 385.; Scott C. Roesch, Kate M. Duan-gado, Allison A. Vaughn, Ariana A. Aldridge, and Feion Villodas. "Dispositional Hope and the Propensity to Hope: A Daily Diary Assessment of Minority Adolescents." *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology* 16, no. 2 (Apr 2010): 191.

<sup>141</sup> Keri J. Brown Kirschman, Michael C. Roberts, Joanna O. Shadlow, and Terri J. Pelley. "An Evaluation of Hope Following a Youth Summer Camp for Inner-City Youth." *Child and Youth Care Forum* 39, no. 6 (December 2010): 388.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 393.

<sup>143</sup> Jessica B. McClintock. "Hope Among Resilient African American Adolescents." (PhD Diss, Marquette University, May 2015), 21.

avoidant coping strategies.<sup>144</sup> These individuals are highly fluid with the paths followed to attain their goals and therefore more likely to reach their goals.<sup>145</sup>

**These studies suggest that high-hope individuals perform better academically, have greater social commerce, and are more apt to view competition or obstacles favorably than low-hope individuals.**

Another study focusing on hope among a general sample of college students sought to determine if hope could be increased during a single therapy session. Most interventions focus on fixing problems, rather than promoting the strengths an individual already has and developing them.<sup>146</sup>

In this study, students participated in a single session of 90 minutes, in which “the agenda of the session was as follows: 1) the choosing of a personal goal, 2) psychoeducation regarding hope, 3) a hope-based goal mapping exer-

cise, and 4) the hope visualization exercise.”<sup>147</sup> Students who participated in the study showed increases in hope scores, sense of life purpose, and vocational calling. They reported significant progress toward their identified goals as compared to students who did not participate in the session and those with the highest hope scores demonstrated the greatest self-reported success.<sup>148</sup>

These studies suggest that high-hope individuals perform better academically, have greater social commerce, and are more apt to view competition or obstacles favorably than low-hope individuals. These individuals feel a positive emotional response in overcoming an obstacle on the way to attaining their goals, and are thus motivated to continue to overcome obstacles. In many cases, facing and overcoming more obstacles results in increasing levels of hope. Hope, it seems, can be taught—even in a 90-minute session.

These studies also suggest that individuals can learn to employ hope through guided goal identification and pathway-mapping exercises—and that these practices might be modified to suit younger students. For example, while it may not be feasible to conduct psychoeducation regarding hope with elementary students due to the complexity involved, it may be possible to introduce them to the process of goal identification and charting paths to achieve selected goals. In this way, students learn about hope without receiving explicit instruction in hope—and instead learn it through practical application of its concepts, in keeping with pragmatist philosophy.

As the students meet their goals, they will begin to evaluate their successes and failures, and begin to apply the process to goals both within and outside of the classroom. Efforts to educate parents about hope and the hope process will engage them in this facet of their chil-

<sup>144</sup> Scott C. Roesch, Kate M. Duangado, Allison A. Vaughn, Ariana A. Aldridge, and Feion Villodas. “Dispositional Hope and the Propensity to Hope: A Daily Diary Assessment of Minority Adolescents.” *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology* 16, no. 2 (Apr 2010): 193; David B. Feldman and Diane E. Dreher. “Can Hope be Changed in 90 Minutes? Testing the Efficacy of a Single-Session Goal-Pursuit Intervention for College Students.” *Journal of Happiness Studies* 13, no. 4 (August 2012): 746.

<sup>145</sup> Scott C. Roesch, Kate M. Duangado, Allison A. Vaughn, Ariana A. Aldridge, and Feion Villodas. “Dispositional Hope and the Propensity to Hope: A Daily Diary Assessment of Minority Adolescents.” *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology* 16, no. 2 (Apr 2010): 195.

<sup>146</sup> David B. Feldman and Diane E. Dreher. “Can Hope be Changed in 90 Minutes? Testing the Efficacy of a Single-Session Goal-Pursuit Intervention for College Students.” *Journal of Happiness Studies* 13, no. 4 (August 2012): 747.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 748.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

dren's education. The practices can be encouraged within the home environment, allowing for further exploration and personal reflection. It may also be helpful to create workshops to support parents in the hope process and how they can facilitate it with regard to their children. Collaboration between educators and parents would result in an enriched and expanded hope experience and more quickly and strongly engrain hope as a habit.

## Conclusion

Given that all of the above findings are supported by psychological research on hope, it is reasonable to conclude that hope is learnable and therefore, perhaps, teachable. By adapting the foundations laid out in the research of positive psychologists and merging it with the view of hope upheld by pragmatist philosophers, educators might seek to integrate hope into the traditional curriculum, starting at an early age. For by starting at an early age, we encourage hope to progress and grow naturally as the student grows, eventually resulting in an individual fully capable of employing hope to achieve their goals and desiring to better themselves and society as a whole.

Positive psychological hope, despite more recent movements, began largely as a construct focused on the self, with little regard for others. Conversely, pragmatist philosophy defines hope in a way that relates individuals to their social surroundings—that is, to the environment one lives in and the people with whom one interacts. It defines hope not as something that is always present, but as something that has to be learned through a process of trial-and-error.

We should therefore aim to include hope in the normal curriculum from an early age. Students need not even understand that they are learning to hope—they need only to be immersed in activities which allow them, with some guidance, to experience hope for them-

selves. As they age, this would naturally become increasingly complex and can be aided by educators.

The result of such action might be a generation of individuals that understands the importance of the part they play as one part of the world around them. They would envision goals and pathways to goals that radiate outward from the self and involve the other, creating more cohesive and powerful movements for social change.

Rather than crash unsuccessfully against barriers toward realizing these goals, individuals who have been educated on how to hope from an early age will flow around the barriers like water, constantly seeking new and innovative ways to reach their goals. One such goal might be the eradication of hopelessness and the promotion of an individual's strengths. This will mean learning to rely on individuals with complementary strengths in order to achieve individual goals and ends-in-view, but will result in a society, both locally and globally, that recognizes that an individual is only part of a dynamic system that can be improved from the ground up.

Recent social movements, particularly among college students, have begun to demonstrate a shift toward this kind of thinking. When Barack Obama first ran for president, he used the word "hope" as part of his campaign efforts. In the most recent campaign, we have seen elements of hope demonstrated in candidates such as Bernie Sanders. Despite failing to secure the Democratic nomination, he has continued to seek other ways to implement the reforms that he feels will result in a more humanistic, familial society. Student organizations appearing on university campuses across the US have focused on using the power of collaboration to seek social reform. As just one example, GlobeMed advocates on issues of social justice and health equity, and is student-founded and largely student-led. In short, the power of social entrepreneurship is great and feeds into this fo-

cus on cultivating hope through the attainment of pro-social goals.

Stirrings like these show that the time has come to seek the betterment of society. People are learning to use hope to achieve their goals, and this understanding is spreading. Educating people from a younger age to use hope empowers them to be change-makers and reformers. Learning from both positive psychology and pragmatist philosophy, educators can begin to integrate hope into lessons in any classroom in any school, perhaps catalyzing a wave of social and personal improvement.

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