

# Rediscovering hope

## Building school cultures of hope for children of poverty

The real problem for children of poverty may not be weak academic skills, poor teachers, or scant resources, but a lack of hope that they can alter their life conditions through effort.

**By Kevin Sheehan and Kevin Rall**

Children who believe that they can't meet academic expectations or that education isn't the answer to the problems of poverty are doomed as their beliefs become their reality.

The real problem for children in poverty may not be weak academic skill sets, poor teachers, or lesser resources, but rather a lack of *hope* that they can alter their life conditions through effort.

But research in positive psychology suggests that creating *hope* may be more of a malleable process that we can control than an inborn attribute, which we do or don't possess. Hope, then, becomes our capacity to clearly conceptualize goals, develop strategies to reach our goals, and initiate strategies and sustain the motivation to achieve those goals. In simplest terms, after individuals define goals, we need the *agency* or



capacity to act and maintain the belief that we can achieve those goals, and the *pathways* or strategies, reinforcement and support necessary to propel us toward the goals. What is implied by the definition of *hope* as a capacity is the idea that we can increase that capacity by influencing the agency and pathways present in an individual (Snyder, 2002).

Although Ruby Payne does not reference *hope theory* as a psychological construct, her research is dominated by the effects of this lack of *hope* on the belief systems of those in poverty:

As one meets and works with a particular family or individual, there is such frustration and, ultimately, grieving because many situations are so embedded as to seem *hopeless*. It's like dealing with the legendary octopus; each time a tentacle is removed, another appears. (Payne, 2001, p. 48.)

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We have all heard the maxim, *if you believe you can, you can, and if you believe you can't, you probably can't*. Students at De La Salle School in Freeport, N.Y., think they can. The question is, why?

De La Salle is an example of a school that is successful at building academic capacity, spiritual strength, a feeling of community — and a culture of hope for children in poverty.

The 10-year-old middle-level school typically enrolls 65 male students of color, all of whom live below the poverty line. Students often enter De La Salle two grade levels behind but are at or above state-mandated levels by the time they complete their program. The students pay a tuition of \$70 per month. In many cases, tuition is subsidized or covered by benefactors. Clearly, tuition is far below the operating costs of the school.

Students spend four years at De La Salle, in grades 5-8, before moving on to high school. All De La Salle graduates have graduated from high school, although the national average suggests that only one in three males from similar conditions of poverty and these neighborhoods would be expected to graduate. And all of the graduates are in a two- or four-year school of higher learning with one student in a trade school. Nearly all of these graduates are the first in their families to attend college.

What could possibly account for the success of this school and these students in situations that would overwhelm most young people facing such odds? What happens to these students that creates the *gentlemen of the De La Salle School* who believe that the sky is the limit when it comes to their futures?

Certainly, the Roman Catholic foundation and the inspiration of founder, Thomas Casey, helps explain some of the hopeful foundation at the school. The school is part of the NativityMiguel Network of Schools, which was established in 2006 to guide and support a network of schools seeking to provide a quality education for families in impoverished neighborhoods. However, surveys of De La Salle students found that although students found religion comforting, they identified other factors that had an even greater effect on their accomplishments as students.

The principles at play in the De La Salle School that transform the lives of these students were identified by C.R. Snyder (2002) in his seminal work on *hope theory*, and they have the power to transform all schools.

## Hope as a change agent

At De La Salle School, we can easily see that the school is building academic capacity, spiritual strength, and a feeling of community. What may be harder to see is that beyond the wonderful design of the school and the curriculum is that these qualities are built on a solid foundation of hope theory (Snyder,

2002). Although hope theory may not have been part of the founding principles of the De La Salle School, the school now embraces the research on hope and has made hope an essential part of the school culture, language, and daily instruction. When Brother Casey extols the virtues of this extraordinary school from the many pulpits that are necessary to find support for the school, the creation of hope is now celebrated as a vital component of the mission of the school.

## Affirming hope

Bandura (1997) defined four factors that are at the heart of the belief in your own effectiveness (self-efficacy). These factors underlie the high hope levels of De La Salle students: *mastery experiences, vicarious experience of others, effective persuaders, and a positive social-emotional climate*.

De La Salle School students begin each school day by reciting the affirmations that define the goals of a De La Salle gentleman:

- I am a De La Salle gentleman.
- I treat myself and others with respect.
- I carry out my responsibilities to the best of my ability each day.
- I am a leader by choosing to do the right thing even when it means that I am standing alone.
- I give back to those less fortunate than myself.
- I dream big.
- I work hard to achieve my dreams.
- I am a De La Salle gentleman (Boniello, 2009).

The affirmations that begin the day not only serve as a verbal pronouncement of the goals for each student, but are, in fact, subtle and constant persuaders that all students can achieve these goals. These shared beliefs help create the positive social-emotional climate necessary to grow hope. Saying the beliefs as a group transforms seemingly unreachable goals into achievable goals. The affirmations are only one way that the school's policies build hope.

A faculty that is both stable and caring reinforces these goals in countless ways. Weekly award assemblies recognize goal achievers, celebratory newsletters and posters of past and current award winners reinforce and help maintain those goals. At some level, all educators can replicate the way that De La Salle nurtures goals, agency, and pathways.

Creating class sizes of 15 to 17 students enables teachers to focus more on each student and allows students to achieve mastery experiences that often eluded them in their home schools. The vicarious experience of others meeting success is everywhere in the school. Alumni, now at local high schools and even those alumni at local colleges return every Wednesday night and on days off, mingling with the current students and sharing their personal success stories.

**De La Salle School is building academic capacity, spiritual strength, and a feeling of community.**



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These graduates continue their association with the school and are living proof of the success that defines their lives, while helping construct a positive social-emotional climate at school that is focused on success. These alumni function as persuaders, but also provide vicarious experience, demonstrating that “others just like you” can achieve these goals.

Brother Casey, the school’s founder and guiding light, is the lead persuader, inspiring his staff to reinforce the belief that students can achieve in the face of adversity. This past Martin Luther King Jr. Day found students and staff writing and sharing their personal hope stories by presenting their personal Dream Big visions in a school assembly. In our research, we learned that De La Salle students saw teachers as persuaders as the number one factor behind their success. To have a hopeful school, you must have hopeful teachers. Hopeful teachers are the engines that drive hopeful schools.

Finally, a positive social-emotional climate is necessary to maintain hope. The collective agency of the De La Salle School finds smiles, laughter, and happiness surrounding these success goals and reinforcing

the self-efficacy of the students. This is the formula that enables the De La Salle School to build hope in every student lucky enough to attend, but this formula is not limited to Catholic schools.

In our research, we found a statistically significant correlation at the school between hope and emotional engagement, and hope scores and behavioral engagement. We also found a statistically significant correlation between hope scores and emotional disaffection and hope and behavioral disaffection. Schools that can increase student hope will experience an increased level of engagement that’s correlated directly with increased achievement in the form of higher grade point averages (Sheehan, Rosen-O’Leary, & Yu, 2011).

### Transferring hope

Recent research on hope suggests that you can apply the researched understandings on infusing hope, agencies, and pathways in any school. Lopez et al. (2010) offer four essential strategies to accentuate hope. The strategies include hope finding, hope bonding, hope enhancing, and hope reminding.

**FIG. 1**  
**The Children’s Hope Scale**

**Directions:** The six sentences below describe how children think about themselves and how they do things in general. Read each sentence carefully. For each sentence, please think about how you are in most situations. Place a check inside the circle that describes YOU the best. For example, place a check (✓) in the circle (O) below “None of the time,” if this describes you. Or, if you are this way “All of the time,” check this circle. Please answer every question by putting a check in one of the circles. There are no right or wrong answers.

	NONE OF THE TIME	A LITTLE OF THE TIME	SOME OF THE TIME	A LOT OF THE TIME	MOST OF THE TIME	ALL OF THE TIME
I think I am doing pretty well.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I can think of many ways to get the things in life that are most important to me.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am doing just as well as other kids my age.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
When I have a problem, I can come up with a way to solve it.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I think the things I have done in the past will help me in the future.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Even when others want to quit, I know that I can find a way to solve a problem.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Notes: When administered to children, this scale is not labeled “The Children’s Hope Scale,” but is called “Questions About Your Goals.”

The total Children’s Hope Scale score is achieved by adding the responses to the six items.

None of the time = 1    A little of the time = 2    Some of the time = 3    A lot of the time = 4    Most of the time = 5    All of the time = 6

The three odd-numbered items tap agency; the three even-numbered items tap pathways.

**Source:** Snyder, C.R., Hoza, B., Pelham, W.E., Rapoff, M., Ware, L., Danovsky, M., Highberger, L., Rubenstein, H., & Stahl, K.J. (1997). The development and validation of the Children’s Hope Scale. *Journal of Pediatric Psychology*, 22, 399-421.

“Hope finding” is the process of making students aware of the disposition of hope in their own dispositions and frames of mind as well as in others. The first step is to identify the current levels of agency and pathways in your own students. An ideal tool to measure hope in adolescents is the Children’s Hope Scale (Figure 1) (Snyder et al., 1997), which measures responses to six questions. Research indicates that higher hope scores indicate greater resilience in maintaining task focus. Teachers can introduce students to the concept of hope by having students identify goals, agency, and pathways of the characters in stories. These stories teach students the language of hope and offer vicarious experiences to reinforce hope attainment.

“Hope bonding” describes relationships that serve as persuaders that we can attain our goals. Though these alliances can be therapeutic in clinical settings, the persuader role is one that each teacher and professional in a school must buy into if a school is to create a culture of hope. Educate teachers about hope theory, and create an understanding of the power of their influence to create positive self-beliefs.

The most promising of the hope directions is the idea of “hope enhancing” — programs that help students form clear goals, develop pathways to achieving those goals, summon the energy and will to meet those goals, and reframe obstacles into challenges (Lopez et al., 2004). In simplest terms, hope enhancing is the idea that we can build hope levels in students if we can get students to buy into their futures. McDermott and Snyder (2000) raised hopeful thinking by presenting students with high-hope stories and asking them to identify goals and relate stories to their own life experiences. Make your school a hope factory through curriculum experiences that share stories and a vocabulary of hope.

Making Hope Happen for Kids (Edwards & Lopez, 2000) was a five-session program developed to increase hope in 4th graders. This program involved active learning approaches in which students acted out scenes of hope, created hope cartoons, played a hope game, and reacted to hope stories. Results indicated significant increases in hope levels in students involved in the program. Pedrotti, Lopez, and Krieshok (2000) developed a version of this same program for 7th graders. This five-week program involved many of the same components as the 4th-grade program, but also included the concept of “hope buddies” to help students through the program. This program again found significant gains in student hope levels.

The final component is “hope reminding,” which includes the development of a feedback loop enabling students to self-monitor and regulate their hope-enhancing processes. These strategies include creating hope reminder checklists, reviewing personal help

stories and bonding with people to reinforce hope goals and barriers (Lopez et al., 2004). Though the field of hope building is in its infancy, these pioneer studies all suggest that student goals, agency, and pathways can be influenced by school cultures that seek to enhance levels of hope.

## Conclusion

The De La Salle School is a story of *hope*, not just for its students, but for all of us. Students succeed in the face of poverty, race, single-parent families, crime-ridden neighborhoods, communities defined by unemployment, and language acquisition. Despite hardships that would crush others, De La Salle students succeed. They have high hope in their individual futures. Building agency and pathways appears to be more important than infusing technology in creating academic success. The De La Salle School lacks a smartboard or even a functioning set of computers in classrooms. The playground is a parking lot, and the school functions on the generosity of its benefactors on a bare-bones budget. None of these conditions have diminished the hope levels or engagement of the students. As we confront the issues of shrinking budgets, we will all have to deal with the reality of doing more with less. With all of the problems facing us today, we could all use a little more *hope* — teachers, administrators, and students. ■

**Make your school a hope factory through curriculum experiences that share stories and a vocabulary of hope.**

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