Nurturing Hope: Views from the K-12 Frontline
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This mixed-methods study explored mid-career (teaching between 6-15 years) public school teachers' perceptions on hope as that which sustained them to continue teaching, despite the profession's multitude of stressors that can lead to burnout and attrition.

One factor considered influential in a teacher's decision to remain in the profession is that of hope (Nieto, 2003). Hope is vital to explore as it has been documented as being essential for providing emotional, psychological, and spiritual support when individuals face life's many challenges and are coping with stress (Farran, Herth, & Popovich, 1995).

The research question for this exploratory study was:

What are mid-career public school teachers' perspectives on the role that hope plays in sustaining them to continue teaching?

Hope is theorized as a multidimensional, dynamic process essential to the human experience. It is “...a way of thinking, a way of feeling, a way of being, and a way of relating to oneself and one’s world. Hope has the ability to be fluid in its expectations, and in the event the desired object or outcome does not occur, hope can still be present” (Farran, Herth, & Popovich, 1995, p. 6).

The multidimensional hope model (the Hope Process Framework), developed by nurse researchers Farran, Herth, and Popovich (1995), and modified to highlight the influence of hope in teacher attrition, was utilized to explore participants’ perspectives on hope as a sustaining influence when coping with occupational stress.

The hope process framework posits there are four processes that influence hope in varying order and degree, depending upon the individual. These processes are the Relational, Rational, Emotional, and Spiritual/Transcendent. Each is grounded in the psychological, psychiatric, philosophical and theological disciplines. For this study, the researcher modified the model and moved the concept of time from the Rational process into its own, called “temporality.” This was to see how and if the perception of time played a role in teacher’s hope.

The hope processes work synergistically, with individuals drawing on different hope processes to strengthen and build hope and counter influences that can lead to teacher attrition. These processes help one to balance the interplay between hope and hopelessness.

The Hope Processes

Rational: the cognitive-affective-behavioral dimension, which includes personal agency; the "mind" of hope
Relational: focuses on the importance of relationships for hope to flourish; the "heart" of hope
Experiential: one's experiences related to the trials of life and the awareness of our boundaries; the "soul" of hope
Spiritual/Transcendent: the ability to rise above one's present challenging circumstances (the trial); can include faith, having meaning and purpose in one's life, living contextually with the belief that help exists; the "soul" of hope

Temporality/Time: the triangulation of our past and present experiences and future expectations; influences our decision making process and actions taken towards the potential realization of goals.

4 themes emerged from data analysis, which were labeled:
(a) Making a Difference Through Advocacy
(b) Faith-Based Calling to Teach
(c) Autonomy and Respect; and
(d) Total Reliance on God.

Making a Difference Through Advocacy
• Need successes for hope-building; fortifies teachers’ sense of agency
• Being an advocate for students is vital, even if results are not evident right away (“Learning takes time”)
• Showing care through meaningful conversations—Helping students reimagines possibilities
• Feeling they (the teachers) are “planting seeds” with students
• Needing friends and family
• Wanting to make a difference in students’ lives

*Hope came through relationships with students, friends and family, one’s own efforts, and recognition of the importance of time.
*Dismissed need for relationships with colleagues for hope-building: all support comes from God

Faith-Based Calling to Teach
7 out of 25 (2 African American, all female)
• Spiritual/Transcendent & Relational hope processes
• “Reason for everything” not seen as passivity; rather, strengthens religious beliefs that support exists in face of adversity
• Setbacks seen as basis for professional growth
• Religion on religious faith, prayer
• Collegial relationships vital for coping and hoping; visioning together
• Someone who “gets” them and provides comfort
• Friends and family
• Wanting to make a difference in students’ lives

*Patience*: some perceived it as a weakness, others viewed it as necessary while re-strategizing; all felt that being proactive to address challenges strengthened hope, and drew upon their religious beliefs, colleagues and friends, and family.

Consensus Statements

Religious support for hope and strength
• People come and go, but God never does.
• Learning on faith, that there is a reason for everything.
• Belief that a teacher’s life has value and worth, purpose and meaning
• Wanting to make a difference in students’ lives
*Believed themselves to be spiritual but dismissed religion as hope-sustaining.

References

Significance
Understanding the ways in which teachers perceive hope as a sustaining influence as well as their sources of hope may enable teachers and administrators to proactively develop and utilize strategies that nurture teachers and build their hope. This may play a role in offsetting the potential of burnout, thus increasing teacher retention.

Methodology
A systematic mixed-methods research approach that focuses on human subjectivity, was utilized for this study.

Purposive sampling
• Teaching between 6-15 years, inclusive
• Rural, urban, and suburban public schools (New Jersey, Maine, Ohio)
• Grades K-12; all subjects
• Ages 24-59
• Inservice: 23 female, 2 male
• African American (one female, one male) and European American (18 female, 5 male)

Autonomy and Respect
(2 out of 25; European American, female, age 40-49; both 12-15 years teaching)
Rational, Relational, & Spiritual/Transcendent hope processes
• Deep need for control/autonomy (both words were used interchangeably by the participants)
• Deep need for principal’s authentic support for one’s work
• Deep need to be treated as a professional
• Doing activities outside of work for rejuvenation
• Supportive collegial relationships, friends and family
• Belief that one’s life has value and worth, purpose and meaning
• Wanting to make a difference in students’ lives

Total Reliance on God
3 teacher: male African American
Spiritual/Transcendent and Temporal hope processes
• God as unwavering support for hope and strength. “People come and go, but God never does.”
• Learning on faith, that there is a reason for everything.
• Belief that helping teachers make a difference will bring about a better future
• Hope that students will connect what they’re learning in classroom to their life at some point in time; revision life possibilities
• Wanting to make a difference in students’ lives

Uplifting experiences with students reinforces hope

• Takes into account one’s contextual reality
• Existential: provides sense of meaning and purpose in life
• Linked to one’s inner self
• Purpose in life connected to the larger world (students, community, society)
• A visions and yearned expectation for a desired future, despite its uncertainty
• Desired goals will one day manifest, even if never see it
• Priority paradigm: students, colleagues, friends, family, the larger community, a Higher Power (God)
• Uplifting experiences with students reinforces hope

Hope-building strategies...

• Envisioning a desired future
• Action-oriented
• Belief one’s efforts make a difference
• Belief in and reliance on God, prayer, & faith
• Seeing focused on what is within one’s control
• Relationships: reaching out for help (mutual reciprocity)
• Celebrating student successes
• Being a “hopemonger” (Herbert Kohl): encouraging students to learn how to dream beyond the world in which they live; to envision different possibilities
• Collegial support for problem-solving and camaraderie
• Authentic administrator respect and support
• Having control/autonomy in professional life

What are mid-career public school teachers’ perspectives on the role that hope plays in sustaining them to continue teaching?

Hope as that which sustains...

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