Incorporating Hope and Positivity Into Educational Policy

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Abstract
American students are underachieving relative to the nation’s investment in education. One explanation may be the lack of hope and positivity within America’s educational policies. These constructs predict student achievement and improved outcomes in several crisis areas that current educational policy has neglected (e.g., student mental health and school disciplinary practices). Moreover, educational policy can easily incorporate hope and positivity. First, schools can leverage several already-developed, effective, and scalable hope and positivity-based interventions. Second, educational policy can target hope and positivity-based constructs (e.g., student well-being) or incorporate their principles (e.g., focusing on student strengths) in education policy directed at solving problems. Given the evidence, policymakers should leverage hope and positivity in future educational policy.

Key Points
- American students are underachieving relative to our investment in education.
- Leveraging hope and positivity can efficiently increase academic outcomes.
- Hope and positivity predict student achievement and improve several crises areas (e.g., student mental health and school disciplinary practices).
- Incorporating hope and positivity into future educational policy can easily leverage existing, effective, flexible, and scalable interventions.

Introduction
In 2017, out of all developed countries, the United States spent the fourth highest amount per elementary and secondary student (i.e., US$12,300; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2017). Despite its expenditures, U.S. 10th graders ranked 39th in mathematics, 25th in science, and 24th in reading compared with students from other developed countries (Kastberg, Chan, Murray, & Gonzales, 2017). Among other explanations (e.g., bad policy; Steinberg, 2014), one of the most widely accepted is that the United States has poor resource allocation, which focuses on improving the wrong aspects of education (Lips & Watkins, 2008).

One promising area, neglected in both educational policy and national reform efforts, is hope and positivity more broadly. First, both constructs meaningfully relate to achievement and student development (e.g., the correlation between hope and achievement is often high; Dixson, Worrell, & Mello, 2017; Feldman & Kubota, 2015; Marques, Gallagher, & Lopez, 2017). Second, several, already-developed, cheap, effective, and potentially scalable interventions target hope and positivity (e.g., Feldman & Dreher, 2012; Okonofua, Paunesku, & Walton, 2016). Thus, they are not only viable targets for reform, but also likely cost-effective.

This article outlines the current science surrounding the potential benefits of incorporating hope and positivity into educational policy and reform. After introducing hope and positivity, this article covers several areas of educational policy where incorporating hope and positivity might be
beneficial. A final section discusses how to incorporate hope and positivity into educational policy.

Hope and Positivity

Positivity

Positivity is a broad construct that consists of a focus on one’s strengths or the prosocial aspects of people that help them thrive (e.g., compassion; Waters, 2011). Within the context of school reform, the latter would entail more than just focusing on those aspects of students that are associated with student achievement (e.g., positive educational expectations; Dixson et al., 2017). Instead, it would include all aspects of students, which would increase their probability of thriving. A host of success-oriented concepts fall under this construct, such as forgiveness, gratitude, fairness, and humility (Lounsbury, Fisher, Levy, & Welsh, 2009). The breadth of positivity is one of its biggest advantages for school reform because it makes this focus scalable. Schools can focus on those positive psychological aspects that suit their personnel and resources. Moreover, positivity constructs not only predict achievement (e.g., see Hattie, 2008; Lounsbury et al., 2009; Niemiec, 2012 for review): Most positivity constructs (e.g., mindfulness, student well-being, kindness) also predict other school-related outcomes such as academic engagement (Singh et al., 2016), academic competence (Huebner, Gilman, & Laughlin, 1999), and peer acceptance (Layous, Nelson, Oberle, Schonert-Reichl, & Lyubomirsky, 2012).

Hope

Hope is a specific positivity-based construct that is independently highlighted here because (a) it has close, documented relationships with success-oriented school-related outcomes (e.g., academic self-concept, achievement, educational expectations, and school belonging; Dixson et al., 2017; Dixson & Stevens, 2018), (b) the development of hope in American schools is severely lacking (Feldman & Dreher, 2012), and (c) the science underlying it as a target for systematic change is robust (Dixson, Keltner, Worrell, & Mello, 2017; Dixson, Worrell et al., 2017; Dixson & Stevens, 2018; Feldman & Dreher, 2012; Marques, Lopez, & Pais-Ribeiro, 2011). Hope is defined as one’s perceived ability to envision a path to a better tomorrow, coupled with the belief that one can make it so (Dixson & Stevens, 2018). It has two components, pathways and agency. Pathways reflect one’s ability to envision the steps to a desirable future, irrespective of current circumstances, whereas agency is the belief, as well as corresponding motivation, that one can achieve the desirable future via the envisioned path. These components are seen as additive to one another, and both are required for hopefulness (Dixson, 2019; Dixson, Worrell et al., 2017).

One of the biggest advantages of targeting hope for educational reform: Hope seems to start a self-perpetuating feedback loop that could lead to higher student success. For example, the subscales of hope predicted five variables that make up a psychosocial profile of achievement—school belonging, academic self-concept, goal valuation, attitude toward teachers, and academic motivation/self-regulation (Dixson & Stevens, 2018). In 117 adolescents, pathways and agency accounted for 17% to 30% of these psychosocial variables after controlling for demographics and previous achievement. Mixed with several other findings—such as hope relating to more success-oriented behaviors (Dixson, 2019) and achievement relating to increased hope (i.e., Yarcheski & Mahon, 2016)—indicates that educational policy that encourages hopefulness may set in motion a feedback loop centered around hope and academic success. The theoretical feedback loop consists of increasing the hope of students, which could then increase the success-oriented mind-sets (Dixson & Stevens, 2018) and behaviors of students (Dixson, 2019), leading to higher achievement in school (Dixson, Worrell et al., 2017), and subsequently higher hope (closing the loop; Yarcheski & Mahon, 2016). It is important to note here that these assertions (like many throughout this article) are grounded in correlational-based research and hence, does not imply causality. Nonetheless, they do imply possibilities that future experimental studies can clarify.

Potential Benefits of Incorporating Hope and Positivity Into Educational Policy

Current educational policy does not emphasize increasing students’ hope or positivity. Rarely does educational policy focus on developing the whole student, particularly, those nonacademic aspects that are necessary for students to become productive, sociable, and contributing members of society (e.g., developing their compassion, empathy, or self-concept; Policy Analysis for California Education, 2013). Hardly any educational policy includes key hope-related concepts, such as encouraging students to aim for goals beyond what is typical of their current circumstances or getting students to believe in their ability to accomplish difficult goals (i.e., self-efficacy beliefs). For example, despite the many educational policies benchmarking student achievement (e.g., common core standards; Policy Analysis for California Education, 2013), almost no policies take into account students’ goals for themselves or their sense of academic efficacy (Council of Chief State School Officers & National Governors Association, 2010). This ignores the multitude of research linking hope and its subscales to academic success at all levels of schooling (Dixson, Worrell et al., 2017; Feldman & Kubota, 2015; Marques et al., 2017; Snyder et al., 2002). What is particularly surprising about the lack of hope-related concepts in the educational policies surrounding the Common Core Standards is that these standards were written to ensure readiness for college, and hope predicts college achievement (even after controlling for ACT
scores), college graduation rates over a 6-year period, and college dismissal rates over a 6-year period (Snyder et al., 2002). Hope and positivity have the potential to make a positive impact in the lives of students if properly leveraged in educational policy.

**Positivity and Educational Policy**

If positivity were to be more heavily incorporated into educational policy, beyond potentially increasing student achievement, positivity has the potential to improve student disciplinary and mental health outcomes (Bradshaw, Mitchell, & Leaf, 2010; Okonofua et al., 2016; Shoshani & Steinmetz, 2014).

**Current disciplinary practices and outcomes.** In 2018, the NCES found that slightly more than one of every 20 students are suspended each year (5.28%). More troubling is that by the end of high school, almost one fifth of students (19.6%) report that they have served either an out-of-school suspension or have been expelled from school (25.7% of males; NCES, 2016). The disciplining of some minority groups is even more troubling. In 2016, although African American and Hispanic males made up only 21% of public-school students, they accounted for 39% of expelled students. Comparatively, European American males made up 25% of all students enrolled in public schools in 2018, while accounting for an equivalent 27% of expelled students (Office for Civil Right, 2018). Students are being disciplined at an alarmingly high rate, especially given the cost and outcomes associated with school suspensions and expulsions. For example, data from the UCLA Civil Rights Project (2016) estimated that 10th-grade suspensions alone cost American taxpayers over 35 billion dollars in lost tax revenues, health care expenses, and criminal justice expenses over the course of the lives of those suspended. Furthermore, an analysis that included almost all students enrolled in American public schools (49.9 million of just over 50 million) indicated that due to out-of-school suspensions, American students lost over 11.3 billion days of school in the 2015-2016 school year alone (Losen & Whitaker, 2018).

Finally, merely one suspension has been associated with a 100% increase in dropout rates (16% to 32%) and a 30.67% decrease in graduation rates (75% to 52%); Problem Solving & Response to Intervention Project, 2015). Ironically, these school discipline issues happen within the context of educational policy focused exclusively on remedying these issues (e.g., Education Commission of the States, 2018; U.S. Department of Education, 2014).

**How positivity can improve disciplinary outcomes.** A focus on positivity cultivates higher student engagement and less behavioral problems in schools. For instance, a team of researchers conducted a series of studies that examined the impact of teacher positivity on student behavior and suspension rates (Okonofua et al., 2016). In their first two studies, they found that (a) teachers could be easily encouraged to develop a more empathetic mind-set to discipline (via getting them to read a passage encouraging them to develop stronger ties to their students) and (b) when students are treated empathically by a teacher who is disciplining them, they are more likely to maintain respect for the teacher and be more motivated to behave in the future. In a third study, assessing the scalability of their initial findings in five diverse middle schools, they found that teachers who completed two online modules that encouraged a more empathetic mind-set were half as likely to suspend students than control group teachers (Okonofua et al., 2016; see also Goyer et al., 2019).

Similarly, a longitudinal, randomized control trial examined the effectiveness of schoolwide positive behavior interventions and supports on student disciplinary outcomes (Bradshaw et al., 2010). In 37 schools, teaching, monitoring, and rewarding behavior based on positive expectations resulted in fewer suspensions and higher math achievement (see also Lassen, Steele, & Sailor, 2006). Altogether, leveraging positivity via educational policy could potentially lead to better disciplinary outcomes across the United States.

**Current mental health practices and outcomes in schools.** Mental health is a key aspect of student development. Good mental health is a necessity if students are to achieve academically and thrive throughout their lives (e.g., mental health correlates with both life satisfaction and achievement; Marques, Pais-Ribeiro et al., 2011; Owens, Stevenson, Hadwin, & Norgate, 2012). Much educational policy focuses on helping students maintain good mental health, such as state laws mandating mental health education (New York State Legislative Assembly, 2018; Virginia Legislative Assembly, 2018).

Nonetheless, some have asserted that American youth are in a mental crisis (e.g., Mahnken, 2017), assertions bolstered by current practices and scientific evidence. For example, current practices have resulted in the ratios of 1,381 students per school psychologist and 482 students per school counselor across American public schools (National Association for College Admission Counseling & American School Counselor Association, 2016; Walcott, Hyson, & Loe, 2017). These ratios persist despite many schools having long waitlists for students to see a mental health professional (Dampier, 2018). Furthermore, the Pew Research Center recently administered a mental-health survey to a diverse sample of teenagers: 96% of teenagers reported that anxiety and depression was either a major problem or minor problem among their peers (Horowitz & Graf, 2019). Similarly, an American College Health Association survey (2018) administered to almost 90,000 students discovered that within the previous 12 months, 26.5% of the sample had been treated for anxiety, 18.7% for depression, and 33.2% for stress. Thus, despite the importance of student mental health and the educational policies directed at improving student mental health outcomes, students are still struggling.
**How positivity can improve mental health outcomes in schools.**

One of the most effective ways to increase the mental health of students is to proactively prevent poor mental health from arising in the first place (Seligman, Rashid, & Parks, 2006): This plan of action is called primary prevention. If schools proactively promote positivity (which decreases the risk for all students), they would lower the rates of students with poor mental health (Shoshani & Steinmetz, 2014). In a large scale positivity-based intervention consisting of seventh through ninth-grade students (Shoshani & Steinmetz, 2014), some were randomly assigned to participate in 15 mini in-class workshops focused on positivity (e.g., gratitude). These students experienced lower general psychological distress, depression, and anxiety, while reporting higher self-esteem and self-efficacy 4 years later, as compared with the control group.

In a different study, positive-psychology group therapy was carried out with students at-risk of poor mental health (Seligman et al., 2006). Positive-psychology group therapy consisted of six sessions that focused on (a) assessing and thinking of ways to utilize one’s strengths, (b) counting one’s blessings, (c) thinking about one’s ideal future, (d) interacting positively with others, and (e) savoring life. Out of four groups of adolescents who qualified as having mild to moderate depression based on the Beck Depression Inventory, those randomly assigned to the treatment group experienced meaningfully less depression post-intervention and 1 year later, compared with the control group. Furthermore, those who received positive-psychology therapy also reported more satisfaction with life both 3 months and 1-year post-treatment, compared with the control group (see also Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Lyubomirsky, Sousa, & Dickerhoof, 2006). Given all the evidence, including the positive interventions, their scalability, and the relative ease of implementing them, positivity is a prime target for educational policy to leverage, increasing student mental health on a large scale.

**Hope and Educational Policy**

Incorporating hope into educational policy would be a natural fit, as goals are already engrained within the culture of schools (e.g., graduating from high school, going to college, even becoming prom king). However, despite the robust literature indicating the importance of hope within the school setting (e.g., Dixson, Worrell et al., 2017; Dixson & Stevens, 2018; Feldman & Kubota, 2015), very little educational policy targets the cultivation of hope in schools. Incorporating hope into educational policy could most benefit student development and student goals.

**Current student development and goal practices in schools.** With the No Child Left Behind Act (and subsequently, the Every Student Succeeds Act) playing a major role in public school funding and basing many funding decisions on standardized test scores, schools are understandably focusing the majority of their resources on increasing student standardized test scores (McMurrer, 2007). However, this effort comes at the expense of school time devoted to developing the whole student, including helping students hone their goal identification and pursuit skills. For instance, an examination of a nationally representative sample of 349 school districts found that most schools changed their instructional time allocations after No Child Left Behind (McMurrer, 2007). More specifically, 62% of school districts reported that they increased instructional time devoted to English and math in their elementary schools, while more than 20% reported that they did the same in their middle schools. The average reported increase in instructional time was 47% for English, 37% for math, and 43% across both subjects combined. These changes resulted in school districts reporting about a 32% decrease in instructional time for social studies, science, art, music, physical education, lunch, and recess (about 145 min per week). In other words, schools shifted their instructional focus to reaching benchmarks (to continue to receive funding) at the expense of providing time for students to exercise, develop goals relevant to them, hone their social skills, and explore nontraditional academic subjects.

The neglect of goals and whole-student development is not just a response to annual standardized testing. Almost any school district’s curriculum or list of annual student awards (areas incentivized by schools) will reveal that student-centered goals and whole-student development are not represented in either. Arguably, American students lag behind other countries, relative to our investment, because of the narrow curriculum that neglects student goals and a well-rounded education (e.g., Jimenez & Sargrad, 2018). Given that educational practices depend on educational policy, focusing on hope in future educational policy can result in better development of the whole student, better student-centered goal training, and better standardized test scores.

**How hope can positively impact student development and goal practices in schools.** An increased focus on hope could positively impact both student development and goal training. Hope itself is one’s attitude toward a series of goal pursuits, with each goal pursued informing subsequent ones (Snyder, 2002). So, by definition, a larger focus on developing students’ hope—getting students to dream bigger and believe in themselves more—means a larger focus on goals (Dixson, Keltner, et al., 2017). Moreover, hope also encourages student-centered development, as hope goals result from academic and personal exploration (Feldman & Dreher, 2012; Snyder, 2002). For example, a 90-min hope intervention had students mentally explore all aspects of their lives (including academic and personal) to choose a desirable stretch goal that they wanted to complete within 6 months (Feldman & Dreher, 2012). Then, students mentally went through the goal-achievement process (i.e., thinking up likely obstacles,
overcoming them, and accomplishing their goals). The intervention not only increased hope (both agency and pathways), but also increased students’ sense of purpose in life and goal progress.

The intervention has several relevant key points. First, it trained students on the various aspects of hope (i.e., pathways, agency, and hope) at the beginning of the intervention. Thus, part of this intervention’s results can be attributed to the experimenters training students to have higher hope for the future. Second, as the stretch goals of the students were student-generated (i.e., they could have chosen any goal they wanted), they will likely aid in the facilitation of student development because their mental exploration helped them identify the area in their lives that they most wanted to develop further (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This is especially important for school aged-children, because instead of a school telling them which area they should develop next (e.g., how school is conducted under Common Core), the students identified it—which likely translates into the students being more motivated, spending more free time, and being happier while developing the area (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Fortunately, even though time dedicated to non-English and mathematic subjects is decreasing (McMurrer, 2007), several quick hope interventions have been developed within the school context that could help students with their goal training as well as with their overall development as students (e.g., Marques et al., 2011; Weis & Speridakos, 2011). Educational policy can facilitate an increased focus on both student-centered development and student goals via increasing its focus on hope in future educational policy.

How to Incorporate Hope and Positivity Into Educational Policy

Incorporating positivity and hope into educational policy can improve student outcomes through many methods. However, given the instructional and resource constraints of many schools (McMurrer, 2007), one of the more practical and efficient ways would be to implement cheap, quick (i.e., < 90 min), and effective schoolwide interventions. If educational policy were to facilitate effective, evidence-based, schoolwide interventions centered on hope or positivity, they could not only raise the academic achievement of students (making America more competitive to other countries), but also be a cost-efficient way to improve student outcomes more broadly (e.g., student discipline, student development, mental health, and goal development). Such interventions have already been developed and evaluated within schools centered on hope (e.g., Feldman & Kubota, 2015; Marques et al., 2011; Weis & Speridakos, 2011) and positivity (e.g., Bradshaw et al., 2010; Okonofua et al., 2016; Shoshani & Steinmetz, 2014; Waters, 2011).

Another practical approach would include the essence of positivity and hope in educational policy directed at more marketable topics, such as student attendance and discipline. One way to incorporate positivity into these other educational policies is to target positivity principles (e.g., focusing on building up student strengths) or constructs (e.g., compassion, gratitude, happiness) to aid in solving the problem. For example, instead of outlining a positivity approach to increase student attendance, policymakers could craft educational policy that targets increasing the satisfaction of students while they are at school (i.e., target student life satisfaction, a positivity construct) to improve student attendance.

A third way would be to highlight the utility of positivity-based practices when proposing new teacher training standards. Positivity is unknown to many teachers (Waters, 2011). If introduced in their training, they might find unique and effective ways of including it in their practice (such as in their lesson plans or by incentivizing positivity in their classrooms).

Finally, given the robust evidence on positive behavior support programs (e.g., Bradshaw et al., 2010), policymakers could incorporate aspects of them in existing federal or state educational policies centered around school discipline, especially given the current national school discipline crisis (see Losen & Whitaker, 2018).

Incorporating hope into various educational policies might be easier compared with positivity more broadly. To incorporate hope, policymakers need only minor adjustments to curriculum, initiatives, standards, and training, such as tweaking other educational policy to (a) get students to dream bigger than their circumstances indicate that they should, (b) get students to believe that they can accomplish difficult goals, and (c) get students to experience a wide range of activities, people, and careers so that they can develop better, more personally relevant goals for hope (Dixson, Keltner et al., 2017; Snyder, 2002).

A second method is to craft educational policy that includes hope-related goal activities into advisory periods (sometimes call homeroom periods). Most schools have an advisory period for check-ins with school staff (usually a teacher) on a regular basis (usually weekly; Hopkins, 2004). Incorporating hope into this time is a perfect match. One purpose of these advisory periods is to give students individualized attention to help them succeed (Hopkins, 2004). Dedicating part of this time to training students about goals, helping students think about their goals, and having students check in on their goal progress would be a nondisruptive way to help students be more successful and hopeful.

Finally, policymakers could leverage educational policy to encourage a hope-building culture in schools through encouraging schools to continuously push their students. This can be accomplished through incentivizing schools that reach collective stretch goals (e.g., increased funding to schools that have the most college applications or highest placement rates for disadvantaged groups) or through writing a federal hope guideline memo (e.g., U.S. Department of
Education, 2014) that encourages schools to constantly push students to be the best they can be. Because hope entails agency, students must own their own goals and discover pathways. Whatever the method, where there is a will, there is hope.

In summary, positivity and hope have the potential to contribute to the American reform efforts in education if leveraged in educational policy. Not only have these constructs efficiently and effectively increased student achievement, but also have improved other student outcomes (e.g., mental health, school discipline, student goal development). Moreover, these constructs can inform educational policy indirectly (e.g., slightly changing policy to include hope-related aspects). Given all the issues facing the American educational system, a little more hope and positivity are likely to do some good.

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