Increasing Hope and Self-Efficacy in our Flexible Learning Students

By Maddie Witter & Tom Brunzell, Berry Street

In this uncertain time of community crises fatigue, what holds us together as educators in flexible learning options (FLO) classrooms is our common purpose: to help young people meet their own needs in healthy ways and to successfully transition to future pathways of choice. Many of us work with young people who have experienced more than their fair share of adverse childhood experiences, and we are continuously learning how to bolster them (Brunzell, 2019).

When our young people continue to encounter life's obstacles, their future aspirations can feel unobtainable. In FLO campuses, we must remember to develop our young people's capacities to realise their future aspirations long after their last steps from our school door. Our time with students is finite as we help re-engage and inspire students with opportunities which arise from education. The current COVID-19 reality is making time even more limited in many communities across Australia.

We are currently guided by the following question: *As time becomes increasingly rationed, which learning skills should FLOs prioritise so students are more likely to be successful on their future pathways?*

We want our students to believe in themselves. Self-efficacy is the conclusion a person makes about whether they can accomplish a goal in the future (Bouffard et al., 2005). A person with high self-efficacy values the process of learning (as opposed to only being focussed on the end-goal) and thinks: *I can do this because I can learn the steps to get it done.*

When thinking of people with high self-efficacy, we are frequently reminded of the teams of hikers who aim to do the Oxfam Trail together. Most hiking teams don't impulsively sign up and head out the following day. They value the process of forming the team, then develop the teamwork to build endurance and communication skills. Next, they break it up into achievable steps. For instance, they might first build fitness and endurance at the gym. Then, they might research and plan their food throughout the race. Eventually, hard work might culminate in practice hikes. These smaller steps lead to the end-goal: becoming a team and completing the endurance trail together.

However, having successful self-efficacy isn't as simple as breaking up a bigger goal into achievable steps. It requires a specific style of thinking.

According to *hope theory* (Marques, Lopez, & Pais-Ribeiro, 2011; Snyder, 2002) two important thinking styles enable self-effaceable people to accomplish their goals: *willpower* and *waypower*. Willpower (sometimes known as agency-thinking) refers to motivation and helps us question: *Is this even the right goal at the right time for me? Do I care about this goal?* Having agency is the ability to have a strong level of intention and confidence to set out to accomplish a goal in the first place.

Waypower (sometimes known as pathway-thinking) is the ability to create several different routes to the end goal. Simply put, people who have waypower thinking assume that their plan A will hit a speedbump and could very well fall apart; and thus, they are ready with plan B and plan C. They have deliberately thought ahead about multiple ways to achieve their goal and have the supports in place to maintain their self-efficacy. Hope theory suggests that we need *both* willpower and waypower. You need to maintain motivation that the goals in indeed the right goal at the right time—and be able to create different routes toward your goal.

Imagine one of your students wants her future pathway to become a youth worker. She has the willpower because she's experienced the positive impacts that youth workers have made for her, and she believes that in the future she can make a difference in her community. Yes, plan A is to look up certification courses close to where she lives to begin her pathway. However, we want to ensure she continues brainstorming with waypower.

Our young people may not immediately predict: *What happens if I don't like the instructor's style? What if I can't get along with my peers in the course? What if the coursework feels overwhelming? What if I move to another city during the course?* The answers to all these questions is building waypower in young people—and therefore fortifying their abilities to enact multiple ways to achieve what they set out to do.

The job of building self-efficacy and hope within future pathways should not be left to career counsellors or higher-education advisors, nor should it be left to senior years teachers. Teachers and support staff can take every-day steps at all year-levels to develop willpower- and waypower-thinking, so students are better prepared for the future (Witter, 2013).

Below, we share four strategies schools can start integrating immediately to explicitly teach a hope mindset.

1) **Incorporate inquiry projects**: Inquiry project-based learning is common in FLO contexts. These projects should span multiple days and be led by student choice. Keep in mind, too much choice can be hard for some students. Offer choice, but limit choice when appropriate. *Given our term's focus on sustainability, would you like to study compost or recycling?* Once students have identified an inquiry project, scaffold many opportunities to practice waypower-thinking such as:

   - *What can you do if you find that this article doesn't give you enough information?*
   - *If the internet connection is unreliable, what other options might you have?*
   - *Who in the class can support you on your inquiry journey?*

2) **Model cognitive empathy and self-directed verbal persuasions with think-alouds**: Before setting students off on a project, directly address potential speedbumps by modelling your own process with cognitive empathy (Witter, 2013) wherein you state out-loud your own thinking as a learner to them. Lead students through these steps by saying out-loud to the class:

   - *These types of independent projects can be hard for me sometimes. Let me show you what I'm thinking with my own project. I should break up and schedule my project into achievable tasks.* Model figuring out these steps.
   - *I also need to be prepared for speedbumps. What might they be?* Model, thinking aloud possible speedbumps.
   - *How might I address that speedbump?* Enlist student ideas as you continue the think-aloud.

   The examples above model positive self-talk wherein you are coaching yourself to stay engaged in the task. Known as self-directed verbal persuasion (Bandura, 1986), these can be affirmations such as *I am trying hard* and *I can overcome this*. For instance, you could say: *Finding time for research can be hard with everything else we do in this class, but I can overcome this obstacle if I put aside this dedicated time in my planner.*

3) **Provide hope map graphic organisers**: The hope domains can be drawn as a simple graphic organiser to scaffold learning (see the figure below and Brunzell et al., 2015). We recommend starting simple by asking students to write their goal, and then begin to brainstorm plan A, B, and C to accomplish that goal. After first modelling the process yourself as described in step two, encourage students to independently determine how they can break up the task in achievable steps using a graphic organiser. Include time for students to reflect on the possible speedbumps that might occur for their own projects to support waypower-thinking. Build in opportunity for students to reflect on their progress. Ask questions such as:

- *In what ways are you working toward achieving your goals?*
- *Who can you turn to for help?*
- *Do you need to rethink any steps to help you achieve your goals?*
- *Were there any unanticipated speedbumps?*

It starts with
MY GOAL

PLAN A *(might not work out!)*

PLAN B *(who can I go to for support?)*

PLAN C (what other ways could I accomplish my goal?)

4) **Process praise**: Our students require continuous feedback throughout the task to remind them that their goals are important (willpower) and to maintain their own focus on the different pathways to new learning (waypower). For many students, receiving feedback on their work can be an escalating endeavour because they are not used to having a supportive person give advice when they are struggling to learn. Thus, creating cultures of 'fix-it feedback' in our classrooms builds hope (Witter, 2013). Helpful here is Dweck's (2007) strategy of *process praise*, where we aim to maintain our students' focus on the effort they putting into a task, capitalise on the new learning that they are experiencing as a result of their effort, and show them that we are noticing and celebrating the incremental steps they are taking to achieve their goals. It sounds like:
- *You never gave up on your goal today. I noticed you kept looking for new sources for information.*
- *Ah, you hit a speed bump in your project, but then I noticed you collaborating with your friends to get their ideas, too.*

Building self-effaceable and hopeful students can seem at first like a daunting task. Our young people continually show resilience beyond their years to attend school and keep trying again. The next step for us is to be deliberate in the ways we design curriculum, provide fix-it feedback, and nurture a thinking style that harnesses the power of willpower and waypower. We are galvanised by the continuing evolution of hope theory and emerging strategies to support our students as they

prepare for life beyond our classrooms, and we sure hope to learn about your own students' stories of success.

Bandura, A. (1986). *Social foundations of thought and action: A social cognition theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Bouffard, T., Bouchard, M., Goulet, G., Denoncourt, I., & Couture, N. (2005). Influence of achievement goals and self-efficacy on students' self-regulation and performance. *International Journal of Psychology*, *40*(6), 373-384.

Brunzell, T. (2019). Trauma-aware teaching: Strengthening teacher practice so all of our students can learn. *Teacher Learning Network Journal, 26*(2), 3 - 5.

Brunzell, T., Norrish, J., Ralston, S., Abbott, L., Witter, M., Joyce, T., & Larkin, J. (2015). *Berry Street Education Model: Curriculum and Classroom Strategies*. Melbourne, VIC: Berry Street Victoria. www.bsem.org.au

Dweck, C.S. (2007). The perils and promises of praise. *Educational Leadership, 65*, 34-39.

Marques, S., Lopez, S., & Pais-Ribeiro, K. (2011). Building hope for the future: A program to foster strengths in middle-school students. *Journal of Happiness Studies, 12*, 139–152.

Snyder, C.R. (2002). Hope theory: Rainbows in the mind. *Psychological Inquiry, 13*, 249-275.

Witter, M. (2013). *Reading Without Limits.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Maddie Witter (MST) is the author of *Reading Without Limits* and co-creator of the *Berry Street Education Model*. Currently she is Deputy Principal at the Berry Street School. Prior to Berry Street, Maddie co-founded Parkville College in Victoria and KIPP Infinity in New York. Maddie presents internationally on best practices in teaching and school leadership with a specialised focus in high expectations for disengaged and marginalised students. @ReadingWithoutLimits

Dr Tom Brunzell (MST, EdM, PhD) has experience as a teacher, school leader, researcher, education advisor and co-creator of the *Berry Street Education Model*. Currently he is the Director of Education at Berry Street and Honorary Fellow at the University of Melbourne Graduate School of Education. Tom presents internationally on topics of transforming school culture, student engagement, trauma-aware practice, wellbeing and positive psychology, and effective school leadership. @TomBrunzell

Learn more about the *Berry Street Education Model* at www.bsem.org.au