

EDUCATING WITH HOPE: VISIONS, LIMITS, AND POSSIBILITIES OF EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE IN COMPLEX SOCIAL CONTEXTS

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Abstract

The chapter presents the results of qualitative research conducted with 44 social educators working in five different social areas. The aim was to investigate the social educators' idea of the human being that guides their activity and to understand the role they attribute to their professional activity. Starting from the prompting word *hope*, the educational vision and the unique characteristics of today's educator were gathered. This research argues that hope, actively developed through dialogue, is essential for effective education. It empowers social educators to foster personal and collective growth in people by creating trusting, understanding, and ethical environments. The study emphasizes the transformative power of hope and dialogue in creating more equitable and empowering educational experiences and suggests future research explores these dynamics in specific contexts and their long-term impact.

Key words: Participatory research; Hope; Social educational practice; Dialogue; Trust.

1. Introduction

Educators in contemporary education face an ongoing tension between hope and its challenges. Hope is viewed as a dialectical tension within individuals¹, rooted in dissatisfaction with the present and directed toward

¹ R. ZAVALLONI, *Psicologia della speranza*, Edizioni Paoline, Cinisello Balsamo 1994.

a utopian future². In *Hope Theory*, hope is not a vague concept; it encompasses not only aspiration, but also the process of pursuing that aspiration. Hope contributes to the construction of motivation, driving us to proactive action. Snyder's *Hope Theory* similarly posits that hope involves actively pursuing goals through cognitive strategies and mental energy³.

The results of our research introduce two additional concepts: limit and relationship. While the limit might seem contrary to hope, this opposition is only superficial. An implicit belief about hope (also evident in our research) is often linked to a *charity model*, where the social educator transmits hope to the people they take care of⁴. However, recognizing human limitations implies that hope cannot be imposed; rather, from an educational perspective, it is constructed within the educational context, through the relationships among participants.

This study explores the dual role of hope and trust in educational practice, emphasizing their influence on social educators' experiences, particularly in challenging and uncertain social contexts. Through qualitative analysis of social educators' reflections, the study investigates the nuanced relationship between hope, fatigue, and education's transformative potential, considering both personal and systemic dimensions⁵.

In educational settings, hope is frequently discussed in relation to personal resilience, motivation, and future aspirations. However, the deeper implications of hope, especially in conjunction with dialogue, have received less attention. This paper addresses this gap by examining hope as both an emotional and ethical tool in the educational process and by highlighting the importance of dialogue in fostering hope. Although hope is widely acknowledged as a crucial psychological and social resource, its educational significance, specifically regarding how social educators utilize hope to shape pedagogical practices, remains underexplored. Drawing on

² G.M. BERTIN, M. CONTINI, *Educazione alla progettualità esistenziale*, Armando, Milano 2004.

³ C.R. SNYDER, *Hope theory: Rainbows in the mind*, in «Psychological inquiry», n. 13, 2002, pp. 249-275.

⁴ B. VERJEE, *Service-learning: Charity-based or transformative?*, in «Transformative Dialogues: Teaching and Learning Journal», n. 4, 2010, pp. 1-13.

⁵ The chapter presents the partial findings of the research project *Pedagogy reaching out: explorations of the human today between theory and educational practice*, funded through a competitive grant by the Salesian University Institute of Venice. In addition to the authors of this chapter, the research was carried out with the collaboration of colleagues Margherita Cestaro and Luciana Rossi.

interdisciplinary fields, this study investigates how hope, mediated through dialogue, can function as a transformative force within education.

The central research question guiding this study is: *How do educators understand and enact the relationship between hope and dialogue in their practices?*

2. Theoretical Framework

Hope, as a construct, has been explored in different ways. Snyder, for example, sees it as a motivational force. In the field of social education, hope is not only seen as a personal emotion, but also as an ethical tool for dealing with social challenges⁶. Key thinkers, albeit from different epistemologies, such as John Dewey, Paulo Freire and Michail Bachtin offer significant insights into the power of dialogue in education, framing it as a means to build trust, promote mutual understanding and create transformative learning environments⁷.

Hope in education is often discussed as an essential element of resilience and motivation⁸. Educators who cultivate hope in the people contribute to their sense of agency and their ability to imagine a positive future.

Hope is often conceptualised as a powerful driver of personal and social change, but its application in educational contexts can vary significantly. Hope is understood not only as a psychological or emotional state, but as a dynamic relational process that links the social educator's vision to the people's potential. As such, social educators are not only called upon to cultivate hope in individuals, but also to embody and sustain it in the face of significant professional challenges.

The role of hope in social education is deeply intertwined with both internal and external dialogue, as emphasised in the concept of the *I-Thou* relationship investigated by Buber⁹, who posits dialogue as the foundation for authentic hope in educational interactions.

⁶ C.R. SNYDER, *Hope theory: Rainbows in the mind*, cit.

⁷ Cfr. J. DEWEY, *Democrazia ed educazione*, Anicia, Roma 2018; P. FREIRE, *Pedagogia della speranza: un nuovo approccio a "La pedagogia degli oppressi"*, Gruppo Abele, Torino 2014; M.M. BACHTIN, *The dialogic imagination*, University of Texas Press., Austin 1981.

⁸ J. DEWEY, *Democrazia ed educazione*, cit.

⁹ M. BUBER, *Il principio dialogico*, Edizioni di Comunità, Roma 1958.

Freire's emphasis on dialogical pedagogy as a means of empowerment is central to this study. Dialogue, in this sense, is not merely a conversation, but a practice of actions and ethical engagement, that can shape both individual and collective hopes¹⁰. Furthermore, Bakhtin's theory of the dialogic process highlights the importance of listening and responding as a fundamental element in the construction of hope within educational spaces¹¹.

The integration of hope and dialogue also raises important ethical questions regarding the role of educators in shaping the future possibilities of vulnerable individuals. This study will examine how educators perceive their responsibility in nurturing hope, as well as the ethical implications of fostering such hope within a diverse and sometimes adversarial educational landscape.

3. Methodology

The research involved 44 social educators, who were asked about their experiences with fostering hope in their work areas, as well as the challenges they face in promoting hope and dialogue in an often fragmented and challenging educational environment. The sample was constructed based on two characteristics considered relevant to the research hypothesis: educational background and the type of users of the services in which they work. In relation to educational background, the decision was made to consider for the sample only social educators with degrees in pedagogical disciplines, reserving the option to evaluate any other backgrounds, if the number of participants in the focus group did not reach a sufficient quantity¹². Informed consent was obtained, and participants were assured that their responses would be used only for the purposes of this study.

Five focus group interviews were conducted with a diverse sample of educators from different areas of social work¹³.

At the end of the sampling and construction of the interview grid, 5 focus groups were held, one per type of user, of about 2 hours each, with a participation distributed as follows:

¹⁰ P. FREIRE, *Pedagogia della speranza*, cit.

¹¹ M.M. BAKHTIN, *The dialogic imagination*, cit.

¹² M. CARDANO, *La ricerca qualitativa*, il Mulino, Bologna 2011.

¹³ S. CORRAO, *Il focus group*, FrancoAngeli, Milano 2005.

1. Difficult Minors: 10 participants
2. Early Childhood Education: 9 participants
3. Disability Inclusion: 11 participants
4. Elderly Care: 6 participants
5. Intercultural Settings: 8 participants

The focus-group interviews aimed to find out the participants' point of view on 4 prompting words. One of these was *hope*. All participants were invited to reflect on the term hope to highlight the role of hope in their educational practices and how they use dialogue as a means to promote hope. The data collected were then compared with literature that synthesizes relevant theoretical perspectives on hope and dialogue.

The study has adopted a qualitative approach¹⁴ to the ideas of social workers about various topics, including the perspective of hope and dialogue. The point of view is that human experience is a complex object of investigation and never completely investigated with only quantitative methods.

Interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring themes related to hope, dialogue, and their intersection.

This chapter presents the results that emerged through the prompting word *hope*.

Given the sensitive nature of the topic, special attention was paid to ethical considerations, including the confidentiality and anonymity of participants. A phenomenological hermeneutic approach was adopted, identifying the structuring themes of the experience investigated within the transcripts, with the aim not so much of *explaining*, but rather of understanding the complexity of the lived experiences moving from the narrative of those directly concerned to bring out what Wilhelm Dilthey called *the secret of the person*¹⁵. This process was carried out through an analysis and categorization of qualitative data using the software Atlas-ti (Version 23.4.0)¹⁶. All collected transcripts have been uploaded to the software. The

¹⁴ N.K. DENZIN, Y.S. LINCOLN (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research*. Sage, London 2011; L. MORTARI, *Cultura della ricerca e pedagogia*, Carocci, Roma 2007.

¹⁵ Cfr. A. BELLINGRERI, *L'evento persona*, Scholé, Brescia 2018; W. DILTHEY, *Descriptive psychology and historical understanding*, Springer Science & Business Media, Berlino 2012; M. VAN MANEN, *Phenomenology of practice*, in «Phenomenology & Practice», n. 1, 2007, pp. 11-30.

¹⁶ L. GIULIANO, G. LA ROCCA, *L'analisi automatica e semi-automatica di dati testuali. Software e istruzioni per l'uso*, LED Edizioni universitarie, Milano 2008.

recurrent themes in the material were then identified, in relation to the research demand and the conceptual reference model, creating a first level of analysis. The second level of analysis¹⁷ saw the effort to cross, compare and integrate the different categories emerged in order to bring out significant interpretative trajectories.

4. Findings

The findings revealed several key themes in social educators' perceptions of hope and dialogue.

Firstly, we observed the fatigue experienced by social workers who face challenges related to recognition and systemic barriers. A key challenge for social workers is the lack of full recognition of their professional contributions, particularly in comparison to other professions. They often experience frustration due to their work being undervalued, both in terms of legislative support and professional acknowledgment. This is particularly apparent in early childhood education and in sectors serving vulnerable populations. Some social educators expressed that the often delayed and intangible impact of their work makes it difficult to secure immediate recognition. Furthermore, systemic issues, such as inadequate legal protections and financial compensation, contribute to professional fatigue. This disillusionment is compounded by the perception that their work is undervalued by society, despite education's transformative role in shaping future generations.

Secondly, social educators described their emotional experiences in different areas of social work. The intense emotions experienced in education, particularly in situations involving hardship and suffering, can lead to what some social workers term *fatigue of hope*. Educators in fields such as social work with marginalized populations often experience feelings of helplessness and burnout. The emotional toll of working in under-resourced environments or with individuals facing significant personal challenges can diminish the sense of hope that educators strive to maintain.

However, many educators believe that hope must be tempered by an honest assessment of their operational limitations. Hope is not a panacea but a realistic acknowledgment of the constraints faced by both social ed-

¹⁷ M. VAN MANEN, *Phenomenology of practice*, cit.

ucators and people who they care about. Some social educators express that their aspirations often conflict with the realities of their work. The risk of false hope – the belief that change will occur without concrete effort – is a valid concern. This is especially true when outcomes fail to meet expectations, as when projects or initiatives are unsuccessful due to external factors beyond the educator's control. In these instances, social educators emphasize the importance of *doing the work* - not simply hoping but analyzing the current situation and actively addressing the challenges hindering progress. Hope, in this context, becomes a dynamic force that requires constant reflection and adaptation. This form of hope necessitates that educators engage in a broader dialogue concerning the conditions of education - its policies, structures, and goals. As one educator argues, hope must be coupled with action; it is insufficient to simply *wait for change* without *acting to create it*. Hope is therefore viewed as a force that propels educators toward advocacy and activism, urging them to address issues such as legislative reforms, educational equity, and the socio-economic conditions affecting the lives of those they serve.

Furthermore, for some, the fatigue is not simply discouragement but an opportunity to reflect on the deeper meaning of their work. As one educator notes, the tension between hope and disillusionment often prompts a deeper questioning of their potential impact. The recognition of limitations - whether related to resources, societal change, or individual transformation - does not diminish the importance of their work; instead, it underscores the need for a more realistic and resilient form of hope.

From this point, the interviewees highlighted how hope becomes a source of strength and change. Hope, in its most transformative form, is not a passive expectation that things will improve on their own. Rather, it is an active engagement with the world, a commitment to working toward a better future despite the challenges. As reflected by several educators, hope is tied to action: it involves advocating for change, both on a personal and systemic level. Social educators must not only hope for improvement in the lives of the people they serve, but also take concrete steps to facilitate that improvement. The key passage in the reasoning of the people involved in the focus group is the *hope to trust* that is the transformative power of relationships.

Ultimately, the persistence of hope in education is contingent upon the trust between social educators and the individuals they support. Trust is a prerequisite for meaningful educational relationships, as it creates the

environment in which hope can be nourished. Educators who cultivate trust empower the individuals to believe in their capacity for change and growth. As one social educator notes, trust is the cornerstone of effective guidance; it is the reciprocal trust between the educators and the individuals that enables genuine transformation. This trust is not unconditional; it requires constant nurturing, and sometimes, risk. Social educators guide the people through challenges and also take risks, trusting that their efforts will yield results, even when immediate outcomes are not apparent. The educator's role is not to ensure success but to foster an environment where trust and hope can thrive.

Yes, even for me a little bit of hope is about nurturing hope and also nurturing hope, a little bit I read it to trust, because at the base if there is not this trust, this faith, even educational action becomes performing everyday things. Instead there is also the idea that something generates. (FG_Difficult Minors)

Thus, while educators often confront the daunting reality that not all their efforts will succeed and that not all individuals will respond as hoped - a risk inherent in social and educational work - it is precisely through this risk that hope gains greater significance. By acknowledging the potential for setbacks, educators can approach their work with resilience, embracing challenges as opportunities for professional and personal growth, both for themselves and those they serve. The relationship between hope and resilience is crucial; hope fuels resilience, and resilience sustains hope. As one educator notes, the key to persevering through the challenges of social work is maintaining confidence in the process, even amidst uncertainty about outcomes.

Hope comes to me to say is also that which feeds and sustains all the things of before: the risk, (because I hope) which sustains the absence (because I take off and hope that) which sustains the doubt, the not doing, because it is not a mere taking off but it is also a having faith, a hope that however in my no, in my saying enough, I am sustained not by the effort, but by the hope that that choice of mine is the right one because I hope that however even through that, something else may come. (FG_Difficult Minors)

5. Discussion

Findings from the study suggest that hope, cultivated through dialogue, is a valuable pedagogical resource in social contexts. Hope fosters a sense of individual and collective possibility, while dialogue promotes the cultivation of mutual understanding, respect, and ethical responsibility. Yet, the research also underscored considerable difficulties in applying these practices, particularly in high-pressure educational settings, where the solution of practice problems and the red tape takes precedence over emotional growth.

From this standpoint, it is possible to highlight several key implications.

First of all, social educators play a crucial role in cultivating hope and fostering dialogue in their areas of social work. By integrating these elements, they can contribute to the holistic development of people they support in life achievement, with emotional and ethical growth. Findings suggest that they utilize this awareness to cultivate more space for dialogue and emotional connection in the setting.

Yes, then hope is what moves thought. The thinking that then leads to the factual change. In the sense that we don't all function in the same way, we function differently and everyone, no one is lost, and I think this is a dogma that every educator carries, and so in my opinion it's really hope that leads us to think about what to activate in order to be able to help the person in front of me to reach their goals. It's hope that brings us to that, it's the basis in the sense that if I didn't have hope that something can be done or built, I wouldn't be doing this job, I would be doing something else, I would be a bank clerk maybe. (FG_Difficult Minors)

In social educational practice, pedagogical action acquires the characteristics of hope when it involves projection, a term whose etymological roots in the Latin *pro - iecto* refer to concepts such as *throwing beyond*, *moving forward*, and *orienting thought toward possible worlds*¹⁸. Therefore, educating implies projecting a purpose that becomes a horizon of potential change, necessitating further steps and specific objectives. Future research could investigate the relationship between hope and dialogue within more

¹⁸ Cfr. P. ZONCA, *Progetto e persona. Percorsi di progettualità educativa*, SEI, Torino 2004; L. ZECCA, S. NEGRI, *Il progetto pedagogico organizzativo nei servizi e nelle scuole per l'infanzia. Nuova edizione riveduta e ampliata. Orientamenti e Pratiche 0-6*, Edizioni Junior, Bergamo 2023.

specific social educational settings, such as inclusive context. Additionally, longitudinal studies could examine how these practices influence individuals' long-term development and success.

Secondly, the focus group analysis consistently highlighted hope as an inherent aspect of educational action, directing the educator's focus toward the individual and the possibility of transformation. Hope is intrinsically connected to the function of education, understood as guiding individuals toward a vision of *the good*. However, what is meant by *the good*? *The good* is defined as a superior condition, an aim that justifies pursuit. While this *good* is a future state apparent to the social educator, it may remain imperceptible to the individual being served. The educator's function is to guide the individual toward this state, serving as a guidepost of potentiality amidst perceived ambiguity. In this context, hope is not sporadic; rather, it is an ongoing, daily presence in educational practice. It is as constant and essential as salt, accompanying educators as a steadfast presence throughout their professional journey. As one social educator reflects:

If we don't have hope that situations can change, especially in cases of social hardship related to disability, we are left asking: What are we working for? If I don't have hope, I don't know why I'm investing in a project or spending my time. Hope is the foundation of educational work (FG_3. Disability Inclusion).

This consistent thread of hope in educational action serves as the very essence of why social educators continue their work. Paulo Freire emphasizes the critical importance of hope when he asserts: «Hope alone does not transform the world... but depriving oneself of hope in the struggle for improvement is a frivolous illusion. Hope is an ontological necessity that needs to be anchored in practice, so it can be realized in the historical reality»¹⁹. Hope, for Freire, is not a passive waiting but an active, practical force within educational settings.

Furthermore, hope, conceived as the driving force of social educational action, propels every educational endeavor. This hopeful anticipation of the future represents the ethical core of educational life. However, this hope is not devoid of risk; it necessitates a leap of trust, a commitment to possibility, and an acceptance of the uncertainty inherent in transformative processes. As one educator in the focus group shares:

¹⁹ P. FREIRE, *Pedagogia della speranza*, cit., p. 10.

There is no assumption of risk without hope, and there is no hope without risk. This tells us about the possibility of exercising freedom within a complex horizon of meaning...hope opens new pathways, moves thought, and fuels the trust needed for transformation (FG_Intercultural Settings).

Hope becomes not only a vision of the future, but also a motivating force that propels action. Educators see it as their task to guide people from their immediate needs to their broader aspirations, creating a pathway that transcends the limitations of their current circumstances. The role of hope is echoed by Maria Zambrano, who describes hope as the *hunger to be fully born*, a desire to bring to fruition the possibilities within us that are only partially realized. Hope, for Zambrano, is the very substance of life, the force that allows us to face uncertainty and incompleteness with a forward-looking, projective perspective²⁰.

As hope serves as the engine of educational action, it must also be nurtured. Educators not only carry hope with them, but are also responsible for feeding it, for ensuring that it continues to grow and sustain their work. One educator says, underscoring the reciprocal relationship between their hope:

We live with hope and by hope [...]If we, as educators, do not see hope, our children will not see it either. They look to us to find that vision of the future and to help bring it to life (FG_Early Childhood Education).

Hope, in this context, is not a passive state of wishing; it is a dynamic force that requires concrete action. It is through the social educator's concrete work, their words and actions, that hope is given form and substance. One educator notes that hope must be actively carried forward:

We must be the ones to make hope real, to ensure it is not just an abstract idea but something that drives us to act (FG_Disability Inclusion).

This nurturing of hope is not a solitary task, but a collective one. Social educators recognize that hope must be shared and cultivated within a community of practice. In group settings, hope can become a shared resource, a collective vision that fuels the work of the team and fosters a sense of possibility.

²⁰ M. ZAMBRANO, *Verso un sapere dell'anima*, Raffaello Cortina, Milano 1996.

The work of hope must be shared, one educator insists, emphasizing the importance of collaboration: Together, we can create a life project, a future that includes multiple perspectives. Hope is not just about individual belief; it must be a collective vision (FG_Disability Inclusion).

Finally, how does hope manifest in the daily practices of social educators? The interviewees describe hope as an attitude, one that is often communicated nonverbally through a *positive gaze*, the first point of contact that allows educators to enter the inner world of the individuals. This gaze, imbued with positivity and availability, sets the foundation for building a relationship based on mutual trust. Through this lens, the educator's role is to see the people not merely for their limitations but for their potential, recognizing the *half-full glass* in every situation.

As another educator states:

The hope that we offer is not blind; it is tempered by a sense of limits, acknowledging what can and cannot be done. But it is through this recognition that we can create a shared vision of what is possible (FG_Disability Inclusion).

Hope thus requires a balance between acknowledging the limits of the present and imagining the possibilities for the future.

6. Conclusion

This study has illuminated the central role of hope, cultivated through dialogue, in shaping effective educational practices. Findings reveal that hope is not merely a passive sentiment, but an active force that empowers social educators to guide people toward personal and collective growth. Dialogue emerges as a crucial mechanism for fostering this hope, creating environments characterized by trust, mutual understanding, and ethical responsibility.

However, the study also acknowledges the significant challenges educators face, including systemic barriers and the tension between the high-pressure educational settings and emotional development. Social educators navigate these complexities by embracing a realistic and resilient form of hope, one that acknowledges limitations while maintaining a commitment to positive change.

Ultimately, the research underscores the transformative power of hope and dialogue in education. By recognizing the potential within each indi-

vidual and fostering collaborative relationships, social educators can create a more equitable and empowering educational experience. Future research should continue to explore these dynamics in specific educational contexts and examine their long-term impact on people's lives.