



The HOPE Framework: A Literacy Strategy for Identifying Hope in Narratives as a Response to Young People's Eco-grief

Colleen B. Redmond, University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, United States

Abstract

This article outlines the Healing Opportunities for Processing Eco-grief (or HOPE) framework. Modeled on hope theory research, the framework includes four textual markers for hope: 1) Motivation for Change, 2) Belief that Change is Possible, 3) Plans for a Path Forward, and 4) Agency to Take Action. This article introduces the HOPE framework as a pedagogical strategy to assist educators in climate literacy practices that spark dialogue and healing through centering hope as a lived practice.

Keywords

[eco-grief](#), hope, HOPE Framework, [climate literacy](#), [climate emotions](#), [collective action](#)

An introduction to the HOPE framework

Not far into Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time* (1962), Charles Wallace, Calvin, and Meg realize the magnitude of the challenges they face. To offer strength for what's to come, Mrs. Who says: "Nothing is hopeless; we must hope for everything" (p. 61). Young people today, too, need hope as they face a magnitude of challenges related to the climate crisis. Such hope must include action-based strategies that embrace "a committed and active struggle" (Duncan-Andrade, 2009, p. 185). This article offers an overview of the HOPE framework as a tool for educators to integrate hope-centered strategies into their climate literacy practices. Modeled on hope theory established by [Charles R. Snyder](#) (2002) and expanded on by [Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone](#) (2022), the framework proposed below includes four textual markers: 1) Motivation for Change, 2) Belief that Change is Possible, 3) Plans for a Path Forward, and 4) Agency to Take Action. The HOPE framework is designed to help students explore the intersections of hope, eco-grief, and climate literacy through the study of hope as a tangible action-based construct that can be identified in stories and used to spark healing dialogue with youth, especially as a response to eco-grief. The concept of hope-sparking dialogue is grounded in Paulo Freire's notion of dialogical action, where "subjects meet in cooperation in order to transform the world" (2018, p. 167). Literature offers opportunities for just such dialogical transformation through the discussion of hope and grief represented in a story. This leads to conversations involving the readers' own experiences and reframes their understanding of what hope is and how it works.

Hope, eco-grief, and youth

This framework emerged in response to the ever-growing evidence of the global mental health impacts on youth due to the climate emergency. As Elin Kelsey (2020) notes, "The environmental crisis is also a crisis of hope" (p. 4). A 2021 survey of over 10,000 youth ages 16-25 found that when asked about climate change, 75% of youth found the future frightening and 59% were extremely worried. More than half reported sadness, anxiety, anger, powerlessness, helplessness, and guilt. 45% admitted that these feelings negatively impact their lives on a daily basis (Hickman et al., 2021). Whether or not students are talking about it at school, they are almost certainly

experiencing a range of climate emotions. With this in mind, I began thinking about how hope might be better defined and used as a response to negative climate emotions. As a graduate student in Literacy Education, I also wondered how stories might be used for this task.

The field of climate emotions includes a wide variety of feelings organized in [Climate Emotions Wheel](#) (Pihkala, 2022; Climate Barometer 2022). One such term, specifically addressed in the HOPE framework, is eco-grief: “the grief felt in relation to experienced or anticipated ecological losses, including the loss of species, ecosystems and meaningful landscapes due to acute or chronic environmental change” (Cunsolo and Ellis, p. 275). Eco-grief is a phenomenon with global causes. A 2019 report by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) estimates that about one million species on Earth are facing extinction, a rate which is tens to hundreds of times higher than average and is expected to increase without direct conservation efforts. Humans have now notably altered 75% of the planet’s land surface, impacted the loss of over 85% of wetland area, and set in motion ever increasing damage for 66% of Earth’s oceans (ibid). A 2017 American Psychological Association report shows that these losses have not gone unnoticed. The study found instances of emotional dysregulation in children as young as three years old due to both experienced and anticipated climate impacts (Clayton et al., 2017). Being aware of this deeply personal sense of loss many youths are facing is crucial for engaging with the HOPE framework. By acknowledging students’ and our own eco-grief, we are better able to understand the need for hope and the opportunities literature holds for healing.

Rethinking hope as action

It is important to understand what is meant by the concept of *hope*. Merriam-Webster (2018) defines hope as, “desire accompanied by expectation of or belief in fulfillment”—a line of thinking focused on *expectations* illustrated in Francis Bacon’s notion of hope as “a good breakfast, but a bad supper” (Bartlett, 1968, p. 20). By contrast, Greta Thunberg (2022) describes hope as “taking action” (p. 421). It is this action-oriented mindset, based on the work of C.R. Snyder, Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone, that informs the HOPE framework. According to Snyder, hope consists of

“the perceived capability to derive pathways to desired goals and motivate oneself via agency thinking to use those pathways” (p. 249). Hope is likewise action-oriented for Macy and Johnstone. In *Active Hope*, they assert that hope involves three steps: 1) facing a realistic view of the problem that acknowledges emotions, 2) identifying a vision for what needs to change, and 3) creating a concrete plan to move in a new direction (pp. 4-5). Central to the promise of the HOPE framework is a large body of evidence showing consistently positive impacts for people with higher levels of action-based hope in quality-of-life indicators such as healthy eating, exercise, resilience to stress, and overall mental health, including lower rates of anxiety and depression (Gallagher & Lopez, 2017). As Kelsey notes, “hope improves our capacity to engage with the real and overwhelming issues we face” (p. 11). Snyder likewise asserts specific potential for hope in education: “The results to date indicate that hope, taught in the classroom context of a school setting, can be raised” (p. 262). Oziewicz’s proposal about planetarianism and the potential of planetarianist stories to help students develop “hope-oriented anticipatory imagination” is another example of advocacy for story-based hope work in the classroom (2022, p. 242). In other words, hope not only heals but also can be taught.

Exploring the use of the HOPE framework in climate literature

The textual markers on which the HOPE framework is based include *Motivation* for change, *Belief* that change is possible, *Plans* for a path forward, and *Agency* to take action (see Figure 1). By recognizing these elements in narratives, whether published texts or in the students’ own stories, a framework for guiding the discourse toward hope is created. This HOPE framework allows hope, an often nebulous concept, to become visible through the characters’ actions. The story then becomes a springboard for conversations around climate literacy while also spurring on

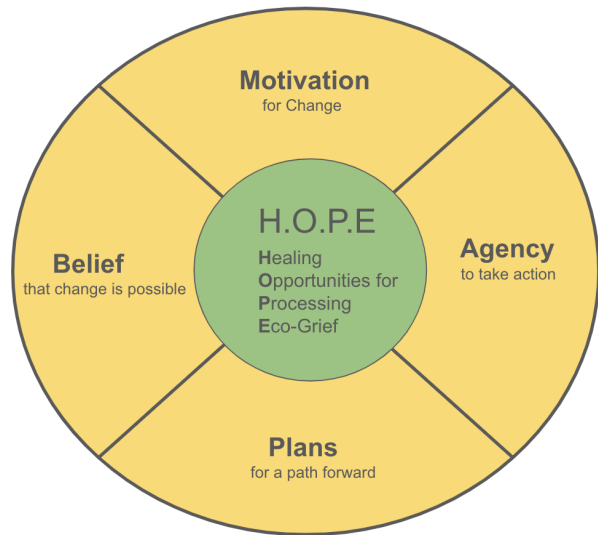


Figure 1

readers' reflections on their own motivations, beliefs, plans, and agency.

To illustrate the HOPE framework in action, I examine Shaunna and John Stith's picturebook [*Black Beach: A Community, an Oil Spill, and the Origin of Earth Day*](#) (2023). *Black Beach* tells the story of Sam, a girl living in Santa Barbara, CA, during the Union Oil spill in January 1969 and of the events leading up to the first Earth Day. The story revolves around the consequences of people's actions on the environment and how the characters move forward with hope toward solutions. The four hope markers of Motivation, Belief, Plans, and Agency guide readers to identify elements of hope in the narrative and to recognize opportunities for processing their own eco-grief.

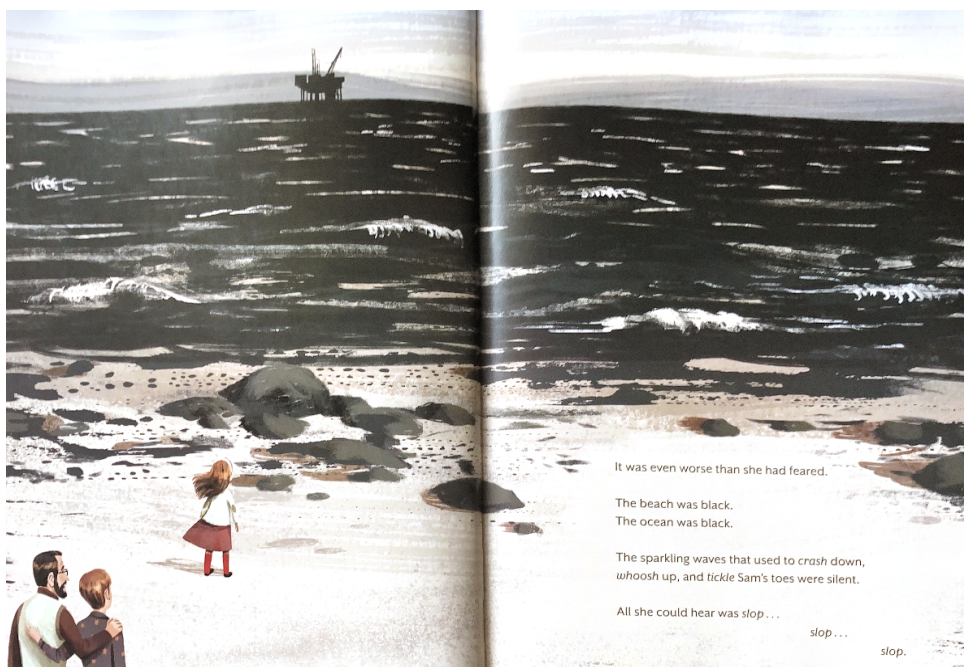


Figure 2

In *Black Beach*, after Sam learns of the spill, she runs anxiously down to see her beloved beach. "With each step, she could feel the weight of her worry." Later, she stands on the beach with her parents looking out into the oil-filled water. "It was even worse than she feared" (Fig 2). Although this is certainly a terrible event, it serves as

motivation for Sam to take steps toward action. In the context of the HOPE framework, as unlikely as it seems, this step is part of hope. Although motivation does not always need to be tragic, it often is.

Grief, however, can paralyze motivation which brings up an important point of discussion within the HOPE framework. After the oil spill in *Black Beach*, Sam sits by herself on the beach looking out at the polluted water. “Sam felt helpless. All she could do was sit back and watch” (Fig 3). This is the lowest point of the story. It is important to note that, at first, Sam faces her eco-grief alone. As the book continues, it is only by working together with others that Sam can move forward. This power of collective action is a key element of hope and an essential part of engaging students through the HOPE framework.

The importance of collective action is illustrated in *Black Beach* when Sam joins her friends in filling bottles with oily sand to send to politicians, believing this would make a difference. “If the people in power saw what had happened, then maybe they would work to prevent it from ever happening again” (Fig 4). This *belief* has an impact. Senator Gaylord Nelson visits Santa Barbara which sets in motion *plans* for the first Earth Day. Examples of the hope markers—motivation, belief, and plans—appear multiple times in *Black Beach* and build upon each other.

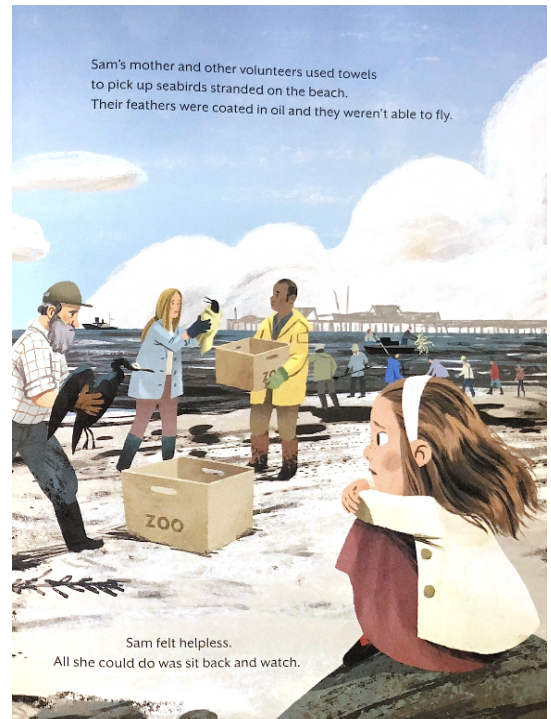


Figure 3



Figure 4

This is true as well for the fourth element of hope: the agency to take action. Sam finds agency as she carries out the plans for Earth Day: “The more Sam learned, the more powerful she felt.” She puts up signs on the beach to protect it and bring awareness of environmental issues. “There was still more work to do, and Sam and her friends were just getting started” (Fig 5). Each event described above serves as an excellent entry point for dialogue with students. Each helps them recognize hope and eco-grief both in the story and as part of their own emotions in relation to the climate crisis.



Figure 5

Bringing hope and eco-grief into classroom conversations

Educators know well the power of stories to inspire students and build inroads for learning. Stories, too, serve as launching pads for topics that can often be hard to know how to begin, including climate change and the myriad emotions that come with it. Fear, anxiety, and helplessness are just some of the feelings youth face each day and with the ever-accelerating climate emergency the impact of eco-grief is of particular concern. It is now, more than ever, that young people need to find hope in their future, and this is where the power of stories comes in.

Hope is much more than wishful thinking. It is an emotion driving action and healing. It can reveal itself as such in stories *if* we know what to look for. The four Hope Markers presented here help not only find hope in literature but also frame discussions around motivation, belief, plans, and agency that allow students to share their worries and fears for the planet. Besides *Black Beach*, many other picturebooks engage with a collective response to eco-grief. Among them are Juana Martinez-Neal’s [Zonia’s Rainforest](#) (2021) and Meeg Pincas’ *Ocean Soup* (2021), both of which also work well for bringing Hope Markers into the classroom. The HOPE framework can also be used for exploring stories for older readers, such as Alan Gratz’s *Two Degrees* (2022), Amy Allgeyer’s [Dig Too Deep](#) (2016), and Katherine Applegate’s *Willodeen* (2021). The

Hope Markers are adaptable to a wide range of literature, and there is likely a story already waiting to try out on your bookshelf.

Ultimately, the power of stories comes not just from the author's words but from the ideas they inspire. Using the Hope Markers empowers students to voice and honor their eco-grief while also realizing that hope can exist both in published stories and in their own. In the end, it is this realization that will help us all move closer to hope and healing.

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