Historical Thinking Culture and Education

DOI 10.12685/htce.1396

Is there a place for hope in history education?

*Bjorn Wansink**

Utrecht University, Utrecht

Abstract

To hope is an integral part of being a human (Webb, 2012). Several educators have suggested that hope should play a crucial role in education to empower young people to shape their own futures and build resilience (hooks, 2003; Freire, 1994; Jacops, 2005; Vlieghe, 2019; de Winter, 2024). I propose that history can and should offer inspiring examples to provide hope for the future, but teaching "hopeful histories" presents both historiographical and ideological challenges. With this miniature I want to start a broader discussion by exploring the question: Is there a place for hope in history education?

Keywords

hope, pedagogies of hope, history education, difficult knowledge, normative balancing

What is hope?

Hope is a complex concept that can be defined in various ways and has different meanings in different cultural contexts. It has been seen as: an emotion, a cognitive process, a state of being, an attitude, a disposition, and more (Webb, 2013). Much research is based on what is called the so-called standard theory, which says that hope involves a desire for an outcome accompanied by the belief that the outcome is possible but not certain in the future (Downie, 1963). Hope as such can serve as a coping mechanism when our well-being is threatened. In history a distressing misuse of this is the slogan "Arbeit macht frei" [work makes free], which encouraged concentration camp prisoners to work harder by giving them false hope of freedom. In this case, hope was cynically exploited by the Nazis.

The crisis of hope

An iconic poster of Barack Obama shows his portrait with the word "hope" underneath. This image encapsulates the powerful message of the then-young senator, urging people not to see the future as something beyond their control, but as something that they can transform for the better through collective effort (Obama, 2014). However, according to Jacop Huber (2024), the concept of (political) hope is in crisis twenty years later. Politically, there is little reason for hope, with wars in the Ukraine, Congo, Sudan and Gaza, the rise of the far-right, and a climate crisis that is being addressed far too slowly.

I think that in history education we are merely confronted with dilemmas concerning political hope. Political hope can be characterized by a particular desire for a specific ideological or

* **Contact:** Bjorn Wansink ✉ b.g.j.wansink@uu.nl
Utrecht University, Department of Education and Pedagogy, Utrecht, Netherlands

political outcome. Jacop Huber (2024) argues that there are forms of (political) hope, whose realization does not depend solely on our own efforts (consider, for example, our hope regarding the outcome of an election in another country). Yet, political hope involves us at least paradigmatically as actors, although the goal is not entirely in our hands, it does require our contribution. Unlike many everyday goals we pursue, political goals are often distant and ambitious; their realization may exceed our lifetime (think of the hope to realize equity in a diverse society). Therefore, political hope requires us to situate ourselves in relation to historical time and the situational context we are in. Moreover, the realization of political hope typically requires collective efforts, which can be initiated by political and social movements.

Although social movements are formed around a specific ideological goal and the hope of achieving it in the future, currently many activists are critical of the concept of hope. This is evident, for example, in the credo of climate activist Greta Thunberg (2019): "I don't want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic. I want you to feel the fear I feel every day." Critics argue that hope leads to passivity and perpetuates inequality, while panic would be a more appropriate response given the state of the world. This more negative view of hope dates to Aristotle, who feared that hope would make us naive to reality. Therefore, when (climate) activists use the term "hope," they often refer to "active hope," which serves as a motivation to continue taking action for the well-being of the planet (e.g., Extinction Rebellion, n.d.)

Pedagogies of hope

In teaching and education, the concept hope has been especially embraced in critical pedagogy, with thinkers like bell hooks (2003) and Paulo Freire (1994) considering hope essential for bringing about social change. However, there are different pedagogies of hope, and they can serve to reproduce social relations as well to transform them (Webb, 2012). In the Netherlands, pedagogue Micha de Winter views hope as the engine for personal development and, therefore, essential for the upbringing of young people (de Winter, 2024). Micha de Winter advocates for a future and social justice-oriented pedagogy that offers young people perspective and assumes growth. He is not alone in this; various studies show that young people with a hopeful outlook on the future are more proactive, happier, and have more confidence in politics than those who are convinced of social decline (e.g., Borman, 2015). According to Micha de Winter, it is therefore necessary for young people to see opportunities for action, for democratic participation to be promoted, and for educators, including teachers, to model hope and optimism.

Hope and history education

When it comes to hope and history education, surprisingly little research is available. However, certain tensions are clear. First, there is a temporal tension. The object of hope (that which you hope for) lies in the future, while the object of history education lies in the past. These two come together in the subject (students or teachers) who are in the present, thereby connecting the past and the future. But while hope and history concern different time frames, they are also connected.

On an individual level, our sense of hope is closely linked to our (personal) past. How we remember and interpret our past influences what we consider possible in the future (Larsen, 2015). We listen to our own story: How hopeful is that? From this psychological perspective, it seems desirable to tell mostly hopeful histories at the collective level in education. However, from a historiographical perspective teaching such "feel good" histories is problematic. The pursuit of hopeful stories can obscure the complexity and often dark aspects of history (Tyson, 2015). It also makes history susceptible to political misuse.

The tension between hope and history

A classic debate in historical theory revolves around the distinction between the practical past and the historical past, a concept introduced by Michael Oakeshott (1983). He defined the "historical past" as the past as constructed by professional historians, who, since the early nineteenth century, have claimed to study the past selflessly, "for the sake of the past," without any practical purpose (Oakeshott, 1983, p. 27). In contrast, the "practical past" is how most people who are not professional historians perceive the past. It is meaningful to those who approach it with the question, "What is to be done?" (Lorenz, 2014, p. 32). According to Chris Lorenz (2014),

Oakeshott's intention in making this distinction was to separate the "world of facts" from the "world of values". Although this strict positivist fact/value difference is epistemologically problematic and can no longer be upheld (e.g. Putnam, 2004), it provides an interesting framework for reflecting on whether hope has a place in history education. When viewed through this strict dichotomy, hope, being oriented toward the future, seems to have no role in the historical past and is instead linked to the practical past.

Historian Ta-Nehisi Coates (2015) argues that a historian who remains faithful to "hope" is ultimately separated from "truth". According to Ta-Nehisi Coates (2015, p. 1), the historian's task is to be realistic, to see what really existed and exists, without yielding to "the ahistorical, the mythical". If a historian must be hopeful, only evidence that confirms your ideological premise remains. Ta-Nehisi Coates, an African-American historian, criticizes the idea (and hope) that the American political tradition follows a historical course that automatically leads to social justice and progress. Historical thinking shows that changes in a society over time require interpretation and explanation, precisely because these changes do not occur in a linear fashion and can also deteriorate.

Historian Peter Wirzbicki (2015) offers another perspective on hope, arguing that despite its many hardships, the past also reveals hopeful developments. Examples include the abolition of slavery, the achievement of women's suffrage, the formation of trade unions, and the defeat of fascism. From this position, the past can be made "practical" by providing students with hopeful narratives that may empower them to shape their own futures. Peter Wirzbicki expresses concern that progressive historians may focus too heavily on a history dominated by oppression, which risks eliminating the possibility of critically examining and reforming the world, as if oppression and capitalism are the only possible outcomes.

The paradox of difficult knowledge and hope

Researcher Lisa Farley (2009) views hope in history education differently, focusing on the role of "difficult knowledge". Difficult knowledge refers not only to the traumatic content of certain types of historical knowledge but also to the internal conflicts (fears and desires) that these representations evoke in students (Britzman, 1998, p. 118). According to Lisa Farley, a paradox occurs in history education. While we try to offer students safety and a hopeful future, a focus on ethical failures in the past can lead to a loss of hope and increasing skepticism among students.

Difficult knowledge raises many questions for students. According to Lisa Farley, teachers can never fully explain why the world fails as history does not offer simple tangible lessons that allow us to prevent future mistakes. This paradox of "difficult knowledge" raises questions about the limits of reason in thinking about the meaning of history and our attempts to make sense of it. This does not mean that teachers should avoid difficult knowledge; according to Lisa Farley, students should learn to tolerate disillusionment and uncertainty, and for her that gives hope. If we only emphasize the promise of reason and progress through education, we forget the underlying conflicts, fears, and uncertainties that questions about difficult historical knowledge bring to the surface.

Discussion

I feel conflicted about the role of hope in history education. On one hand, the belief that education can contribute to a peaceful and social justice-oriented society is a major source of motivation for me as a teacher and researcher. I share Misha de Winter's view that we need to offer young people a hopeful perspective and the sense that they can make a positive impact. I personally have democratic hope, which envisions a society where people are equal in principle, have equal rights, are provided with opportunities to develop themselves, and can freely make their voices heard (de Winter, 2024). However, I also think it's crucial to seriously consider the epistemological and ideological objections to promoting hope in history education.

First, I think that teaching obliges us to treat the past in a practical manner as we teach history to prepare students for the future and to give them agency (Low, 2023). This means that teachers should not treat history as something isolated from the present or as a fixed interpretation. However, we need to recognize that we as teachers and researchers have methodological, moral and epistemological responsibilities. Being aware that your position in time and place, along with your hopes, will inevitably influence how you perceive and present history is

one such responsibility. Additionally, people around the world have different ideological forms of political hope, which can lead to conflict, friction, and the misuse of history. As ascribed to Napoleon Bonaparte: "A leader is a dealer in hope," and we know that leaders around the world often exploit history. A good starting point for education would be to actively explore with students the various forms of hope and their historical contexts over time (Wansink et al., 2018).

What hope can the past give?

The discussion leads to the recurring normative question: What hope to teach? According to Peter Wirzbicki history cannot in itself point to a path to a just future. However, history can provide the building blocks for an ethical vision, but the task of constructing values lies with us and with every contemporary society in a continuous movement (Akkerman et al., 2021). Hope is eventually an existential, ethical and sometimes religious choice. However, we can decide whether we focus on human suffering or human resistance; the horrors of war or the hope for peace; humanity's capacity for evil or solidarity (Hartman, 2015). According to Lea Dasberg (1980), as educators, we must balance presenting injustice and suffering with offering hope and possibilities for improvement. The past offers us all these possibilities, but we decide how to organize, interpret, and teach them. In that choice, we exercise our situated moral freedom and responsibility. History can serve as a source of inspiration and deep reflection, as there is a wealth of knowledge and philosophical and religious traditions across the world that can guide us in how to strive for a better world (e.g., de Graaf, 2024).

Conclusion

Hopeful historical narratives can make us feel good, but they do not necessarily lead to real change or deep historical understanding. At the same time, offering hope for a better and just world is an important pedagogical and psychological goal, it is like oxygen helping students to face the uncertain future with courage and agency. bell hooks (2003, p. xiv) writes: "Educating is always a vocation rooted in hopefulness"; "We live by hope"; Living in hope says to us: "There is a way out, even from the most dangerous and desperate situation." As teachers we must normatively balance between our personal hopes, professional ethics and state curricula. This balancing act can lead to friction and moral dilemmas within ourselves (Wansink et al., 2021). We need researchers who will conduct empirical studies on how history teachers navigate these conflicting goals in relation to hope. Finally, I will not only hold onto hope but will actively strive for a peaceful and more socially just world. I will navigate the balance between my aspirations and doubts, yet remain steadfast, refusing to give up as so many have before me, and they continue to inspire me.

To Cite This Article

Wansink, B. (2025). Is there a place for hope in history education? *Historical Thinking, Culture, and Education, 2*(1). https://doi.org/10.12685/htce.1396

Review

This miniature has been reviewed by the editors of the HTCE journal.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the editors of HTCE for their feedback, which made the article better.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

This research is co-funded by adapt (https://adapt-academy.nl/en/) and Dynamics of Youth, Utrecht University, the Netherlands.

ORCID iD

Bjorn Wansink https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5486-5793

References

Akkerman, S. F., Bakker, A., & Penuel, W. R. (2021). Relevance of educational research: An ontological conceptualization. *Educational Researcher, 50*(6), 416–424. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X211028239

Borman, l. (2015). *The world book of hope*. Lannoo.

Britzman, D. P. (1998). *Lost subjects, contested objects: Toward a psychoanalytic inquiry into learning*. State University of New York Press.

Coates, T. (2015). Hope and the historian. *The Atlanic.* Retrieved from: https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/12/hope-and-the-historian/419961/

Dasberg, L. (1980). *Pedagogiek in de schaduw van het jaar 2000 of hulde aan de hoop* [Pedagogy in the shadow of the year 2000 or a tribute to hope]. Boom.

Downie, R. (1963). Hope. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research, 24*(2), 248–251.

Extinction Rebellion (n.d.) Active hope. Retreived February 26, 2025, from: https://extinctionrebellion.nl/en/events/active-hope/

Farley, L. (2009). Radical hope: Or, the problem of uncertainty in history education. *Curriculum Inquiry, 39*(4), 537–554. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-873X.2009.00456.x

Freire, P. (1994). *Pedagogy of hope.* Continuum.

De Graaf, B. (2024). Wij zijn de tijden. Geschiedenis in crisistijd [We are the times. History in times of crisis]. Diemen, Uitgeverij EW.

Hartman, A. (2015). Hope and historians. *Society for U.S. Intellectual History.* Retreived from: https://s-usih.org/2015/12/hope-and-historians/

hooks, b. (2003). *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope.* New York, Routledge.

Huber, J. (2024). Introduction: the political philosophy of hope. *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy,* 1–10. https://doi.org/10.1080/13698230.2024.2344380

Jacobs, D. (2005). What's Hope got to do with it?: Theorizing Hope in Education. *JAC: A Journal of Composition Theory, 25*(4), 783.

Larsen, L. (2015). De horizon van hoop verbreden [Broadening the horizon of hope]. In L. Borman (ed). *The world book of hope.* Lannoo.

Lorenz, C. (2014). It Takes Three to Tango. History between the 'practical' and the 'historical' Past. *Storia della Storiografia, 65*(1), 29–46.

Low, R. Y. (2023). The Historian as Pedagogue: On Hayden White's Practical Past. In R.Y.S. Low, S. Egan & A. Bell (Eds.), *Using Social Theory in Higher Education* (pp. 227–237). Springer International Publishing.

Obama, B. (2014). Remarks by President Obama in Address to the United Nations General Assembly. Retreived from: https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/24/remarks-president-obama-address-united-nations-general-assembly

Oakeshott, M. (1983). *On History and Other Essays.* Basil Blackwell.

Putnam, H. (2004). *The collapse of the fact/value dichotomy and other essays.* Harvard University Press.

Thunberg, G. (2019). 'I want you to panic': 16-year-old issues climate warning at Davos. Retreived from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RjsLm5PCdVQ

Tyson, T. (2015). Can Honest History Allow for Hope? *The Atlanic.* Retrieved from: https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/12/can-hope-and-history-coexist/420651/

Wansink, B. G. J., Akkerman, S., Zuiker, I., & Wubbels, T. (2018). Where does teaching multiperspectivity in history education begin and end? An analysis of the uses of temporality. *Theory & Research in Social Education, 46*(4), 495–527. https://doi.org/10.1080/00933104.2018.1480439

Wansink, B.G.J., Akkerman, S., & Kennedy, B. (2021). How conflicting perspectives lead a history teacher to epistemic, epistemological, moral and temporal switching: A case study of teaching about the holocaust in The Netherlands. *Intercultural Education, 32*(4), 430–445. https://doi.org/10.1080/14675986.2021.1889986

Wirzbicki, P. (2015). Hope and historians. Society for U.S. Intellectual History. Retreived from: https://s-usih.org/2015/12/hope-and-historians/

Vlieghe, J. (2019). Education and hope, *Ethics and Education, 14*(2), 117–125. https://doi.org/10.1080/17449642.2019.1587688

Webb, D. (2013). Pedagogies of hope. *Studies in Philosophy and Education, 32*, 397–414. 10.1007/s11217-012-9336-1

De Winter, M. (2024). *Medemenselijk opvoeden* [Raising children in a humane manner]. Uitgeverij SWP.