I never knew my writing could have a life outside of school. Now that I know, I keep thinking about what I will write next.

—Middle School Writer in the Writing Hope Works Project

We have a long history of teaching hope in our middle level English language arts classrooms. As teachers, our own hopes for our students—their futures, their successes, and their interests—fuel our teaching practices and drive the plans we set in motion for our classroom communities. But what has also been at our disposal all along—what has always been present in our classrooms—is each student’s capacity to hope. According to extensive hope research in the field of positive psychology, every person has the capacity to hope, and given what we know about cognitive brain research, this ability to hope is not limited to adults, but also extends to young adolescents (Lopez, 2013). Thus, along with each student comes the capacity and the audacity to hope, and this strength of being able to have hope for the future requires our attention and focus when we teach writing too.

Hope, within the context of positive psychology, is a cognitive-motivational strength that combines a person’s affective motivations (will) with their cognitive strategies knowledge (ways) to accomplish meaningful goals (Snyder, 2002). Over the past two decades, research has shown hope to be a domain-specific strength that manifests in a variety of ways across diverse contexts in life and in different academic domains, including writing. Specifically, recent research has shown the many benefits of building “writing hope” in secondary school ELA curricula to include (a) enhancing middle level students’ hopefulness about writing and about life in general and (b) increasing students’ academic and personal writing competencies (Sieben, 2018). Therefore, this article suggests ways of fostering hope during writing instruction through the process of “nexting” (Lopez, 2013), or futurecasting, in order to incur these benefits for all students. Encouraging students to talk about next steps in their writing endeavors generates hope for their writing processes because it incites students to envision future writing events they can plan for, create excitement around, and pursue with energy and intention.

Teaching Writing to Young People with Hope in Mind

Hope is a concept deeply entrenched in our teaching of English language arts; it is a theme that extends through much of our literature and writing prompts; and it is an embedded promise we provide in our positive reinforcement of students’ skill development in our classrooms. Further, hope echoes in our students’ writing, but sometimes we don’t remember to name it or call it out for all the power it can hold. Perhaps this omission of hope in the feedback given to student writers occurs because of the multiple academic access points educators are instructed to search for when teaching writing to young adolescents (e.g., mechanical, organizational, contextual, developmental), so hope is not always a top priority when giving feedback, but it should be. While there is much to focus on in our teaching of ELA skills and limited time to do so, when we identify hope in our students’ work, we give it momentum to travel into the next stage of life with our student writers. We empower...
students to begin “nexting” and “hoping” in their work, their words, and their worlds; and their “writing hope” can grow from there.

By definition, writing hope (Sieben, 2016) is a strength that combines a person’s will (agency) and ways knowledge (strategies) to accomplish meaningful, authentic writing goals. Writing hope contains a reciprocal interaction between will and ways that works in a feedback loop: the more motivation students have for writing (writing hope agency), the more they will continue to use, learn, and explore new ways of pursuing their writing goals (writing hope pathways). Likewise, the more knowledge students have of specific writing strategies (ways), the more agency (will) they will continue to build for engaging in writing processes that lead to short-term and long-term goal pursuit and attainment. In this way, writing hope creates a writing momentum for students that can be powerful in their development as writers with agentic voices.

Given this forward-moving momentum that writing hope provides, a Writing Hope Framework (WHF) emerges as one approach for teaching writing that is strengths-based, process-oriented, and student-centered. Within a Writing Hope Framework (WHF) (Sieben, 2016), teachers and students work together to employ a variety of writing process strategies that are designed to build a hope-focused practice into their writing community. This flexible framework (a) lets students self-define what writing success looks like to them (with support from a writing teacher/coach); (b) encourages students’ development of multiple writing strategies to avoid abandonment of goals when obstacles are present; and (c) builds student motivation and enjoyment into authentic writing processes so students feel personally invested in their writing. As such, the WHF consists of three student-centered components and processes that middle level teachers can use to help students: (a) set worthwhile, authentic writing goals, (b) summon the agency to pursue those goals, and (c) use a variety of pathways to achieve those goals (Sieben, 2016). These components of the WHF are aimed at building writing hope for and with our students now and into the future, and while some students may initiate these processes on their own or with minimal prompting, others may need more guidance and reinforcement from a supportive writing teacher in these pursuits. For this reason, we need to be mindful of building hope moments intentionally into our writing instruction with students and note the ones that arise spontaneously along the way.

The specific strategies each teacher uses within the framework may vary based on classroom context and students’ interests and abilities, but the strategies shared in this article—(1) Capitalizing on Hope Moments, (2) Engaging in Vision Quest Writing, and (3) Using an Intentional Hope Discourse that promotes “Nexting”—are classroom-tested, research-based techniques I recommend as starting points for exploration with middle level students. Ultimately, what makes these techniques (and others developed within a WHF) instrumental in supporting middle level writers is the combination of both cognitive (pathways) and motivational (agency) components that holistically support the cognitive-motivational attributes and abilities all students possess. In this way, these hope-focused approaches allow middle level writers to thrive using all of their unique strengths.

Hope Happenings in the ELA Classroom

In my recent research with middle level students and teachers who volunteered to participate in the NCTE CEE/ELATE Research Initiative Study—“Teaching Writing Hope: A Matter of Social Justice”—I have seen the power of hope in action when ELA teachers capitalize on “hope moments” (Sieben, 2018) in their classrooms. By definition and experience, a “hope moment” or “hope happening” is “a productive event . . . that leads to the growth of hope [motivation and/or pathways] in a person or circumstance” (Sieben, 2018, p. 240). When hope happenings occur during our writing time with students, it can be helpful and powerful to pause and examine what made it so and how we can use this experience to bring hope into the next phase of writing.

Among other data that emerged from this national study was the finding that middle level students, specifically in the earlier years of middle school, tended to have higher hope levels about their writing abilities than their high school counterparts. Throughout the study year, middle level teachers and their students used writing practices that integrated a pedagogy of writing hope, which I shared in summer institute workshops (i.e., as a part of the Writing Hope Works Project) conducted in each school district with participating teachers. In most middle schools, the summer institute workshops, designed to build writing hope strategies into writing instruction during the school year, lasted one to five days, depending on how much time teachers were able to
devote to these professional development conversations in the midst of other demands. In the professional learning communities established between teacher-educators, ELA teachers, and students, hope helped to amplify students’ voices in school and at home.

**Types of Hope Happenings**

A “hope moment” in a middle level classroom can take on many forms. It can be (a) motivational or cognitive; (b) spontaneous or planned; and (c) “skills-based, like [seeing success when] working on transitions between paragraphs, or content-driven, like finding a crucial piece of evidence to support an argument, [but no matter the form] we celebrate all victories and see the celebrations as feedback on our process” (Sieben, 2018, p. 168). Teachers can observe hope moments in their classrooms as agency surges (motivational) or strategy gains (cognitive) by one student, a small group, or an entire class, but the critical component of this teaching tool is to note each occurrence and reinforce its value to students as a useful piece of feedback. Both feelings of affective motivation and cognitive developments in strategy knowledge can serve as helpful feedback to student writers because both types inform ways of moving forward. In planned hope moments, teachers or students intentionally lead others to search for and find hope while writing and can set the tone for the year. Then, once hope-finding is an established part of the culture of a classroom community, hope moments often arise unplanned and are recognized as spontaneous fuel for the future. In this way, hope routinely becomes a meaningful part of the classroom consciousness.

**Specific Hope Happenings and Celebrations**

In the middle school classrooms I observed, hope moments were treasured times between students and teachers completely unique to each class community’s personality and context. Sometimes the celebration was marked by a short cheer the students had made up, and other times the celebration called for a round of applause by classmates, a piece of candy for the writer, a few complimentary words from the teacher or peer reviewer, or a mini-lesson taught by the student who experienced the writing hope moment so that she could share her newfound knowledge. In other classrooms, a “hope moments memory notebook” was placed in a designated spot so that when a student or teacher witnessed a hope happening (either publicly or privately), they could record it in the class notebook for future reference. This practice of documenting hope memories encourages mindfulness of the moments and urges us to look for more along the way.

In one seventh grade classroom I observed during a writing experience workshop, several hope moments emerged amongst each pair of students working side-by-side to build and revise their drafts. When I entered the room, I saw students sharing their personal narratives with elbow partners who asked questions about their partners’ ideas while the teacher walked around holding mini-conferences periodically with each group. In one conference, a middle school student who had a notably short draft announced to his teacher that “writing is always such a stressful activity” for him. He told his teacher that he “never knows where [his] writing will go.” Referencing one of the writing hope pathways strategies (i.e., verbalizing writing) that we discussed during our professional development work together, the teacher suggested to the student that he voice-record his ideas on a classroom iPad as he discussed them with his partner so that he could listen to them afterward and write them down. After recording and listening to their conversation, the student said to his teacher, “I never realized talking could be writing . . . And it makes me see that I . . . how much writing I could get done just by talking my ideas out loud first.” The teacher responded with a compliment to the student about the take-away he found and added how wonderful it is that “he now has a new strategy to use when he gets stuck writing.” The student followed up with, “Yeah . . . And I can do this at home using voice memo on my phone.” Spontaneous moments like this (where a student gained a new cognitive skill for his writer’s toolbox) and others happening simultaneously in other groups illustrate the benefits of a WHF at work in a middle level classroom. These hope happenings show that giving students the power to explore a variety of strategies that work within their unique strengths, rather than forcing them to work within prescribed processes and formulas that do not work for all writers or learners, encourages forward momentum in student writing that is attainable and transferrable.

During the year of the “Teaching Writing Hope” study, I had the opportunity to learn alongside six middle level teachers and their students to collaboratively build
hopeful writing practices (like the ones exemplified above) into their classrooms. In these middle school communities, moving hope moments forward into the next stages of writing included:

- planning hope moment celebrations (for a class, grade level, or entire school);
- encouraging students to recognize, record, and reinforce spontaneous hope moments (in a class hope memory notebook or other class-created project);
- developing daily practices (like using verbal affirmations) that urge students to find feedback that fuels future writing endeavors; and
- reinforcing the value of growth in writing processes by using small tokens of celebration (like class applause or candy rewards).

No matter what type of celebration was decided upon in each class community, this practice of acknowledging success by naming and honoring the moments lingered in the classroom and created a caring climate of hope students could thrive in.

Working within a WHF, students and teachers agreed to celebrate “hope happenings” throughout the year and carry those moments forward into future writing projects during which they would ask, “What’s next for my writing goals, approaches, and/or victories?” By being intentional about bringing hope into each next stage of writing, students and teachers were able to build an intrinsic energy about writing for life goals, and not just for school success. Students wondered, “What can I write next?” instead of “What do I have to write now?”

Looking Ahead: Vision Quest Writing

To entertain students’ inquiries about next writing projects, middle level students and teachers can engage in a Writing Hope Vision Quest together. This activity can be conducted in a variety of ways based on the needs and context of the class community; however, here I share one approach I have used with middle level students. During a Writing Hope Vision Quest, I ask participants, whether students or teachers or both, to close their eyes for a moment and picture a time in the future they determine as important for imaginings. It can be a year from then or ten years from then, but it should be beyond the present time. Then I ask students to consider these three groups of questions and answer them all in their writer’s journals during a series of focused freewrites (Elbow, 2010) that ask students to specifically consider next visions for their writing. The prompts include:

1. **What’s next for my writing goals?** What do I want to work toward accomplishing in the future? How can I find next steps to get there?

2. **What’s next for my writing approaches?** What new strategies can I learn, explore, and experiment with to help me develop my writer’s toolbox in ways that can help me reach my full potential as a writer or help me innovate my writing in new, meaningful ways?

3. **What’s next for my writing victories?** When I think about what my writing accomplishments will be in the future, what do I envision? Do I picture a successful blog, a published poem, a Twitter feed with a full following, or a daily journal devoted to building gratitude/hope/fulfillment? What’s in my writing trophy case, and why have I chosen to put it there? What value does it hold for me?

Middle level freewrites to these prompts varied based on particular students’ interests and writing abilities, but in Figure 1 I share one middle school participant’s responses to demonstrate what a freewrite might include.

This example, and the many others I received from middle school students, shows the level of creativity and hopefulness students put into imagining their writing futures when we ask them to. Some responses were a bit less developed, while others added more details, but each student response tells a story that needs to be heard. This particular response shows the student’s authentic reasons for writing (i.e., to tell an important story, to share his voice with outside audiences) and integrates strengths and interests the student knows he has. With this information from all students, teachers can hold one-on-one conferences with writers to discuss ways of pursuing these individualized writing goals. Focusing on building students’ writing skills from the strengths they already possess (instead of working to fix any deficits) is exactly what the WHF calls us to do—to see writers as worlds of strengths and hopes and to encourage them to use both when writing.
These vision quest questions work in two ways in the classroom, framing two essential purposes. First, the questions help students envision their future writing lives, which also gives more weight to their current writing lives because they become meta-cognitively aware that they’re learning skills now they can transfer into the future. This emphasis on future goals also helps students excavate what truly matters to them as writers in principle and practice. Second, the questions help me as a teacher and/or writing coach see what matters most to students in their writing pursuits and how I might help them to create bridges to their successful futures. Thus, the vision quest supports me as a writing teacher just as much as it supports my students as writers. It serves as an authentic pre-assessment that allows me to learn what my students already know about their writing habits and identities and what they may still need to/want to know. It gives me a place to start in next conversations that can be tailored specifically for each of my students. I can also see what sort of writing futures students are excited about pursuing, whether those projects exist inside or outside of the classroom. Ultimately, my hope is that students’ vision quests reveal that within and beyond our classroom walls writing is an act of future-building that can infuse deep meaning and purpose into our lives. As a class, we discuss the ways in which writing is an act of empowerment (Sieben, 2016) and a tool for making personal goals attainable realities. An activity like a vision quest paired with one-on-one conferences supports middle level writers’ cognitive-motivational needs and shows them I view them as serious writers with important dreams to follow. I commit to supporting them—with both strategy development and motivational encouragement—as they pursue these goals, and we start collaborating on these efforts immediately. Teaching writing within a WHF is about vision questing with students and helping them to find ways of writing about what (i.e., topic) matters most, for whomever (i.e., audience) matters most to them, and why (i.e., writer’s purpose).

“Nexting” through an Intentional Hope Discourse

Teaching students a discourse of “nexting” that invites the writer to have hope, not just for the content they are writing about, but also for the act of writing they are engaging in, is a worthwhile endeavor at every level, and especially in middle level grades when students are beginning to write lengthier pieces and explore new

Figure 1. Middle level writer’s response to the vision quest prompts

1. My next writing goals are to know how to write more about a topic and to find a topic for my next writing project I am excited about. Maybe that’s the problem. Maybe I don’t choose topics I am really excited about. So, in the future, I think I’d like to really take the time to think about the things that I’m interested in... maybe music or something like that. I’m not sure, but I think the next step is to think about what activities I enjoy doing or what topics I like reading about. Then I can choose better, and I’ll write more details.

2. Some new writing approaches I would like to try are: freewriting and drawing a map of my ideas first. I like these two ideas we just learned in class. Writing without needing to worry about grammar has helped me to start writing more, even when I think I have nothing to say... usually something comes out that I can write more about later. I like drawing, so making a map of my ideas seems like an easy way for me to look at what my “big picture” ideas would be. This way, I’ll know where I’m going before I actually start writing. When I draw something, I see more than what I usually put on paper when I write in paragraphs, so maybe map writing can help me with this. I know with writing, you don’t want people to have to make up what they think you mean. You need to tell them. So drawing my ideas in a map will be a start and then I need to write a description of what I drew.

3. When I think about what my writing victories will look like in the future, I envision a children’s book written and illustrated by me. The book doesn’t have to be published by a famous book company, but I want it to be a book other people will read and enjoy reading. I can find a way to match words to pictures I draw or match pictures to a story I write, and I can create a children’s book that tells a story. And not just one that tells a story that children want to read but one that adults will like to read too. So my writing trophy case has in it a children’s book written and illustrated by me. If I can do this, then I will feel like my writing and drawing both have big audiences.
writers’ voices and ideas. As teachers we can encourage the use of language that promotes “nexting” in the classroom by teaching students to consider using phrases like, “I see that this strategy works now because... so in the future I can also use it to...” and “Now that I’ve mastered this strategy in this project, I can learn a new one to try out next time.” Given that recent research shows middle level students reporting higher writing hope levels than high school students do, being intentional about ways to move writing hope forward into high school writing years may be a valuable venture. Integrating future-casting language is one way of doing this. When we guide students to talk about what’s next for them as writers, we encourage them to set short-term and long-term goals and consider what their future writing lives will look like. Thus, at the start of every year, I ask students to write five short-term and long-term goals on the first page of their writing process journals, and we commit to pursuing them together throughout the year.

When we ask students to look towards the next writing activities they might engage in, we can help students “come up with [several] ideas for how to make things happen” (Lopez, 2013, p. 33) and show students writing as a process, not just for one paper or class in school, but as a process for life. Knowing that writing will always have a next stage of life can also alleviate writing anxiety in students who fear final stages of writing for a variety of reasons. Promising students a “next time” can give them hope for other situations in life too because they can come to know that as with writing, life provides many opportunities to navigate to and through multiple scenarios, some of which may seem insurmountable, leading to survival and coping in some circumstances and growth and thriving in others.

While hope can provide a positive gateway to the future, it is also riddled with complexities that must be acknowledged as well. Middle school students experience grief, loss, anxiety, and stress in varying degrees, and those struggles are often expressed in students’ writing, demonstrating obstacles to hope students experience. Finding hope for some students may be a much more arduous task than it is for others, and as teachers of young adolescents we know this work will not look the same with every student and class, and it will not resonate the same way either. The complex spectrum of human emotions cannot be reduced to just “hoping the hard times away,” but recognizing small moments of hope, even in the most challenging times with the hardest of emotions, can make a difference in our students’ educational and personal growth. The WHF takes that into account. It’s not just about celebration, but also about dedication to oneself and one another that we can write better moments into existence if we strive to. And sometimes when events in life feel too bleak for my students to hope on their own, I promise a commitment to hope for and with them until they have the motivation to hope independently. No matter where my students’ hope levels fall, I communicate a shared journey of hope that we will navigate together because the concept of collective hope4 (Sieben, 2018) is powerful and purposeful in bringing students to and through moments of hope they may not be able to find independently at first, but will be able to use independently next.

In my experiences with middle level students, I have seen writing hope exist in students and communities across many levels. To illustrate this point, consider one middle school student, Jess’, who shared during the Writing Hope Works Project, “Girls don’t have a lot to say in my household. It makes me sad and angry. The boys kind of run things: it’s cultural, not personal, they say. When I’m in school, my ideas matter. I want to live here sometimes.” When I sat down to talk with Jess further, she shared excitement about my visit to their eighth-grade classroom because I was a new audience who cared about her writing. She told me:

“Our teacher said you’d be coming to visit and I just . . . I felt like . . . important for a second because, you know, not a lot of other people besides our teachers ask to read our writing . . . to hear our stories. This year felt special because we knew you were there, even all the way in New York . . . excited to hear about our work. Our teacher shared the emails you sent to us. You said you looked forward to reading our writing . . . and it . . . it made me look forward to writing more. It gave me another adult to write for besides [my teacher]. That’s why I’m so excited to share my [personal narrative] with you.”

I reassured Jess I would always be a willing audience, excited to read any writings she wanted to share with me in the future, and I invited her to email me anytime, ending our conversation with the words “I look forward to reading your next story and to feeling the impact it will have.”
This conversation with Jess demonstrated, to me, what sharing writing hope in middle schools can do—it can give students the power to say what they need to say, to be heard in spaces that sometimes delegitimize their voices, and to be affirmed for the impact their stories can hold. If students identify school as a space where their ideas are affirmed and valued, we can harness that writing energy and find connections for them outside of school too. By building on writing “hope moments” in school and using intentional language, we can encourage students to recognize and celebrate “hope moments” in their lives as well. Likewise, in reinforcing students’ hopefulness about certain life moments, we can demonstrate the possibilities that hope creates in their writing lives too.

Next Hopeful Steps

Using a Writing Hope Framework, which puts each student’s unique strengths and experiences at the center of the work, ELA teachers can refocus approaches to writing instruction in ways that centralize a discourse of hope, a process of “nexting,” and a box of tools that prepares students to write authentically for academic and personal goals. While hope has long been a main component of the work that we do as writing teachers, one of the dimensions of this hope that can be reclaimed is the hope found in our middle level student writers. Focusing on writing hope gives students a chance to learn, experience, choose, adapt, and adopt strategies for writing that fit with their unique writers’ voices, talents, and identities. It allows them the opportunity to build their own worlds as writers and to ask questions that lead their pens to paper now… and their words to power next. In each student’s next stage of life as a writer, whether it is when he/she/ze enters high school or college, a trade school, chosen profession, or personal writing endeavor, writing hope can empower each student to choose next steps that will be carried forward into a writing life of meaning and hope for the future.

As middle level teachers, we can encourage students to confront life challenges and writing challenges through a WHF by helping them see that writing is one way to make sense of the hard times in life and celebrate the exciting ones, emphasizing that participating in a process of writing hope is more important than a destination to writing hope. As such, “hope is not an end goal: it’s a starting point. Hope is a journey with all the obstacles and all the successes and everything in between; it’s a process oriented in action, just like writing” (Sieben, 2018, p. xxiv). If hope is the momentum students need to propel them into the future, then writing hope is a concrete way of bringing the future into existence. In this way, writing hope moves our students forward and manifests their strengths aloud.

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Notes

1. A productive event is defined within the Writing Hope Framework (WHF) as an event during which a person experiences a realization and/or surge in hope agency (will) or pathways (strategies) (Sieben, 2018).

2. The mission of the Writing Hope Works Project is that it is designed to build writing hope in school communities across the United States so that students and teachers feel agentic about their authentic purposes for writing. The intention of...
this project is to build a connected community of writers across the U.S. that will build a collective hope in our country that extends far beyond the confines of this project. Through writing, hope can be created, established, and enhanced. (https://www.writinghopeworks.com/about-us)

3. Collective hope is defined within the WHF as “a group hope that has the power to change systems and inspire new ones” (Sieben, 2018, p. 239).

4. Jess is a pseudonym.

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