

# Finding hope at a time of crisis

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Figure 1: When conditions are less than perfect, it is hope that shines through. Photo © Paula Owens.

**At a time when the world community is in the grips of a pandemic and when global warming and biodiversity loss threaten to undermine our civilization, the story of Pandora's Box takes on a contemporary relevance. Here Stephen explores how hope shines a light on the future and encourages us to move forward.**

The story of Pandora's Box is one of many myths that the Ancient Greeks devised to express their ideas about the world and the enigma of life. The story goes that Zeus (the king of the gods) gave Pandora two gifts – the gift of curiosity and a sealed box that she was not to open under any circumstances. Understandably, Pandora found herself fascinated by the box and

eventually her curiosity got the better of her. She decided to take a peek inside to see what it contained. To her dismay, as she opened the lid, a swarm of evil spirits rushed out into the world taking disease and suffering with them. Just one spirit stayed behind. This was the spirit of hope.

## Hope and primary geography

Hope is a complex idea. It goes deeper than wishful thinking and optimism, which tend to be passive and lack any clear sense of purpose. Instead, it can be seen as an active quality – as a grounded vision for the future. This means that hope is a creative process of imagining possibilities and harnessing energy and potential. However, hope also has a darker side in that it stems from a recognition that the current circumstances are far from perfect (Figure 1). Indeed, the way that hope often arises from a disaster means that it encompasses pain and mourning as well

as happiness and love. Such considerations make it clear that hope cannot be accessed by the intellect alone, but that it also involves the heart and soul, as Dave Hicks (2014) argues.

These reflections may seem rather abstract but they have considerable implications for primary geography. Geography is a very broad subject that focuses on the inter-relationships between the physical and human environment. Finding out about how the world is changing and what might lie ahead is one of its central concerns. The scale and extent of current problems can easily seem overwhelming and learning about them is potentially traumatic. Hope offers an antidote to despair and the possibility of constructing a better future.

Putting hope at the forefront of your teaching brings about a profound shift of emphasis. Rather than focusing on a long list of seemingly intractable environmental problems, the hopeful geography teacher

will present them as challenges to which we can seek solutions. Pupils can be encouraged to consider the kind of future that they would like, focusing on what they think is preferable, what they think is possible and what they think is probable. This is one way of initiating a process that will move pupils from being passive observers of events to more active agents who feel they can influence what is happening around them.

Factual knowledge and active learning are part of the arsenal of the hopeful geography teacher. Pupils are often aware of environmental problems from an early age, but confused about the implications. Their sense of vulnerability and need for personal security can then lead to exaggerated or unjustified fears. With respect to global warming, for example, Robin Alexander noted in his review of primary education that the pupils who knew about climate change and aware of practical strategies for energy reduction and sustainability were most confident that they would not be overwhelmed by it. In a telling phrase Alexander reports, 'pessimism turned to hope when witnesses felt they had the power to act' (2010, p. 189). Giving pupils a sense of agency whether through knowledge or action helps to empower them.

## Nature, awe and wonder

Nature has inspired people throughout history. The way in which we attach meaning and derive benefit from the natural world is summed up in the notion of 'biophilia'. Among other things, biophilia highlights how reaching beyond ourselves contributes to our health and well-being and nourishes our spirituality. The ecologist, Stephen Kellert, amplifies this point when he contends that the wondrous beauty of nature is our 'magic well', which he believes is the 'source of who we are and can become' both as individuals and as a society (Kellert, 2012, p. xiv). For geographers, finding out about habitats and biomes is one way of engaging with nature, but local studies and investigations in and around the school are also absolutely crucial in giving pupils direct contact with their surroundings and developing their sense of place and belonging.

It is valuable to give pupils the chance not only to experience the world around them, but also to reflect on its wonders. We live on a remarkable planet with a huge variety of physical environments and forms of life. The cycles of the seasons, the beauty of the landscape and the glory of a summer sunset are all examples of things that people treasure. The delicate interplay of forces, which keeps the planet in harmony, is also something to marvel at. In physical geography, for example, the

processes of erosion are balanced by the processes of mountain-building – multiple feedback loops maintain stability in a world of continual change. Recognising that Earth is a living organism was the core realisation of Gaia theory, first proposed by James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis in the 1970s. And remembering that we are utterly dependent on the planet which supports us evokes the sense of humility that serves to counter arrogance and allows hope to flourish.

Getting pupils to consider the things they are grateful for both in their own lives and in the world at large is another way to promote a positive mindset. This idea has been developed recently in *Letters to the Earth* (Thompson, 2019) in which people of all ages and different walks of life write about love, loss, hope and action as they share their ideas about a planet in crisis. This reaches out beyond the purely cognitive to access emotional and spiritual responses. Musical compositions, paintings, poetry and dance are other ways of touching deep layers of meaning. A cross-curricular approach, which draws on different disciplines to explore our feelings about the world, has great potential to enrich and nourish geographical understanding

## A new approach

It is increasingly apparent that schools need to adapt to changing circumstances. In many instances educational practice has remained remarkably similar for well over a century while the surrounding world has become dramatically and irreversibly different. The latest annual Charney Manor Primary Geography Research Conference recognised this when delegates concluded that there need to be new approaches that embrace notions such as 'divergence, disruption, enchantment, hope, humility and confident uncertainty' (Charney Manor Geography Conference, 2020).

The present formulation of the primary geography curriculum for England sets out an uncompromising agenda that focuses on knowledge. However, deeper questions about disposition, purpose and values lie beneath the factual statements that schools have to follow. Finding time and space to explore and nurture feelings and emotions is important. As Laura Piersol (2014) points out, presenting learning as almost fully known has the effect of removing the possibility of uncertainty and mystery from lessons. Awe, wonder and hope may be difficult to evaluate but they are qualities that are sorely needed at the present time.

Pupils come to school to be inspired, not to be depressed, and hope is fundamental to their educational experience. This is widely affirmed. Tessa Willy and Steve Rawlinson conclude

their introduction to the GA's flagship publication, *Leading Primary Geography*, that education in the 21st century should be about 'preparing for an unpredictable future with realism, hope and optimism' (Willy and Rawlinson, 2019, p. 19). The Brazilian educator and philosopher, Paulo Freire, declares that one of the tasks of the progressive educator is to 'unveil opportunities for hope, no matter what the obstacles may be' (1993, p. 3), and Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone (2012) argue that hope is an active process of bringing healing to the world.

The ills that the evil spirits that escaped from Pandora's Box have wrought on Earth have already done terrible damage. However, the spirit that stayed behind – the spirit of hope – can be harnessed in the service of creating a better future. It may not be powerful enough to bring about change on its own, but it is certainly an essential quality as we grapple with unprecedented challenges. Hopeful geography teachers will seize the opportunity.

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