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# Hope and anticipation in education for a sustainable future<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Global sustainability problems pose serious challenges for humanity. In handling these problems education for sustainable development (ESD) is seen as important. Different key competences that ESD should focus on have been introduced, such as the ability to deal with future dimensions. Still, studies indicate that future dimensions are not always included in ESD and that many young people are pessimistic concerning the global future. Therefore, one could argue that a focus on anticipatory emotions, especially hope, should be included in ESD. There is a worry, however, that hope will lead to unrealistic optimism and/or less engagement. The aim of this paper is to problematize the discussion about hope in relation to ESD and the global future by grounding it in theories from different disciplines and in empirical research about young people, hope, and climate change. The review shows that hope is a complex, multifaceted, and sometimes contested concept. Hope can be related to denial, but in other cases it can help people face and do something constructive with their worries about the global future. The close relation between hope and trust is emphasized and a need for critical emotional awareness in ESD is argued for.

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## 1. Introduction

We live in a world characterized by various global sustainability problems, such as climate change, poverty, and loss of biodiversity, that pose serious challenges for humanity. In dealing with these problems education for sustainable development (ESD) is seen as an important long-term solution, and the need to prepare students for societal change is emphasized (UN, 2015; UNESCO 2014). Various key competences that ESD should focus on have been put forward, such as the ability to deal with future dimensions, that is, anticipatory competence, and the ability to deal with ethical questions, that is, normative competence (Wiek, Withycombe, & Redman, 2011). Not least, educational researchers have pointed to the importance of helping students to handle the ‘wicked’ character of these problems/challenges: the uncertainty, ambiguity, and complexity that are inherent parts of them (Barth, Godemann, Rieckmann, & Stoltenberg, 2007; de Haan, 2006; Lotz-Sistika, Wals, Kronlid, & McGarry, 2015; Rieckmann, 2012). Still, studies indicate that although many young people show an interest in the global future, feelings of helplessness or even hopelessness are quite common (Conell, Fien, Lee, Sykes, & Yencken, 1999; Nordensvaard 2014; Strife, 2012; Threadgold, 2012; Tucci, Mitchell, & Goddard, 2007). Therefore, one could argue that a specific focus on anticipatory emotions, and perhaps especially hope, should be included in ESD (Hicks, 2014; Ojala, 2012; Stevenson & Peterson, 2015; Wals, 2015).

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Lurking behind the pleas for a focus on hope in ESD, however, is a worry that hope is just an illusion, a feel-good emotion that will lead to unrealistic optimism and/or even less engagement around these issues, thereby preserving the status quo (for reviews of this view about hope see for instance [Levitas, 1990](#) and [Zaleski, 1994](#)). In the ESD research field studies that focus on change, transformative learning, and the political dimension of education seldom mention hope, even though the importance of other emotional aspects, such as passions and dissonance, are brought up (see for instance [Lotz-Sistika et al., 2015](#); [Sund & Öhman, 2014](#); [Wals, 2007](#)). The concept of hope is instead included in research about factors that promote or hinders private-sphere pro-environmental behaviour ([Hornsey & Fielding, 2016](#); [Ojala, 2015](#); [Stevenson & Peterson, 2015](#)) and political engagement within the current system, such as voting ([Ojala, 2015](#)). However, can hope also play an important role in transformative learning, in an ESD that helps students face and actively deal with change? There is not much work in this research field that deals with hope in a more thorough theoretical fashion.

The aim of this paper is to deepen, broaden, and problematize the discussion about hope in relation to ESD and the global future. A specific focus will be on transformative learning that prepares students for societal change. The discussion will be grounded both in theories about hope from disparate scientific disciplines and in empirical research about young people's hope concerning global climate change, perhaps the most urgent of all sustainability challenges. Although practical implications for ESD will be elaborated on to a certain extent, it will for example be argued that in order for hope to promote transformative learning there is a need to strike a balance between a critical emotional awareness in ESD and creating trustful relationships, the intention is not to give pre-packaged solutions to how hope can be included in ESD, that is, to instrumentalize hope. Instead, the thought behind this paper is that it is only by gaining combined theoretical and practical insights into how hope works that educators can transform this concept into practice in concrete educational settings.

## 2. Future dimensions in ESD

Future dimensions are firmly embedded in the concept of ESD through the Brundtland Commission's definition of sustainable development as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" ([WCED, 1987, p. 43](#)). This includes both envisaging alternative and preferable futures and to anticipate and prevent future negative developments and consequences of global sustainability problems/challenges (see [Wiek et al., 2011](#)). The need for 'change' and 'transformation' of the current societal order has been emphasized at the highest level in recent years through, for example, two UN documents about the global goals for sustainable development and the global action programme on education for sustainable development ([UN 2015](#); [UNESCO 2014](#)). The question then is how to work concretely with future dimensions in ESD.

Researchers have identified anticipatory thinking as one key competence that ESD ought to promote ([Barth et al., 2007](#); [Wiek et al., 2011](#); [de Haan, 2006](#)). In this regard, it is vital to acknowledge that the conceptualizations of 'sustainability competence' in the ESD field vary from more deterministic ones to more holistic ones. However, the most common view seems to be to perceive sustainability competence as a holistic, contextual, relational, and emergent thing ([Wals, 2015](#)) – emergent in the sense that we cannot tell for sure what a sustainable future should look like; we can only tell what is unsustainable today. Hence, what seems to be in focus when discussing sustainability competences is: "the complex combination of knowledge, skills, understandings, values, and purposes" ([Biesta, 2015; p. 676–667](#)).

Anticipatory thinking in the ESD field is, for instance, about the capability to think in a forward-looking way and to acknowledge and deal with uncertainty in a constructive way ([Wals & Schwarzin, 2012](#)). This is in accordance with the broader anticipatory literature, in which the ability to deal with complexity and uncertainty is seen as pivotal ([Miller, 2007](#); [Poli, 2010](#)). [Wiek and colleagues \(2011, p. 207\)](#) define anticipatory competence as "... the ability to collectively analyze, evaluate, and craft rich 'pictures' of the future related to sustainability issues and sustainability problem-solving frameworks." Anticipatory competence is closely related to other sustainability competencies, such as normative competence, which involves taking ethical dimensions into account when discussing and envisioning preferable and more sustainable futures ([Wiek et al., 2011](#)). It is also related to strategic competence, for instance the ability to find realistic pathways to these futures. In a study with ESD experts, [Rieckman \(2012\)](#) found that future dimensions such as anticipatory skills, skills to achieve change, and empowerment strategies, as well as competency to cope with ambiguity, frustration, and uncertainty related to these future dimensions were mentioned frequently in relation to ESD practice. Thus, according to researchers and experts, the future and the complexity connected to it ought to be an important part of ESD.

[Torbjörnsson and Molin \(2015\)](#) have shown, however, that future dimensions are not a common topic in schools, at least not in Swedish schools when students are asked if they have learned about the future (see also [Hicks, 2002](#)). In addition, many studies performed in different countries indicate that people are quite pessimistic about the global future, particularly when it comes to environmental problems such as climate change ([Conell et al., 1999](#); [Hicks, 2002](#); [Nordensvaard, 2014](#); [Strife, 2012](#); [Threadgold, 2012](#); [Tucci et al., 2007](#)). Therefore, one could argue that emotional aspects, especially anticipatory emotions of hope and worry, ought to be specific parts of ESD. This view is supported by a study showing that students in higher education saw one important aspect that they would like to focus on in ESD as being how to deal with the worrisome and sometimes even depressing aspects of global problems in a hopeful manner ([Gardiner & Rieckmann, 2015](#)). These students wanted to learn more about how to deal with worry and how to promote hope. Hence, critical emotional awareness, including hope, could be seen as an important additional competence to promote in ESD ([Ojala, 2013](#)).

If one thinks that hope ought to be included in ESD, it is important to pinpoint what hope is. In the coming sections I will first define what hope is from a psychological perspective, where hope is seen as consisting of cognitive, emotional, and

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