

Research articles

# Learning languages of hope and advocacy - human rights perspectives in language education for sustainable development

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## Abstract

What if the way we (teach and learn to) *speak* about human rights crises is part of these crises? This conceptual paper sets out to explore the role of a human rights-informed pedagogy of hope in helping learners cultivate languages of hope and advocacy in the context of language education for sustainable development. Recognising that a focus on agency connects critical pedagogies of hope, human rights education, and language education, this contribution argues that the language classroom may become a space of hope by offering stories of hope, change, and transformation to help learners envision a better future and take communicative action towards these futures. Cultivating languages of hope and advocacy highlights the learners' role as active change agents who assume responsibility in the face of their human rights *duties* and act accordingly. Thus, human rights-informed language education may empower learners to contribute to living together in a more sustainable and just world.

## Keywords

Global citizenship education, language education, languages of hope and advocacy, pedagogy of hope, sustainability

## **Human rights and language education for sustainable development**

Pondering the question whether there is a solution to climate change, philosopher Bayo Akomolafe dares his audience to ask: ‘What if the way we respond to the crisis is part of the crisis?’ (2019, 05:35). Building on this thought from a language education perspective, a follow-up question could be raised: ‘What if the way we (teach and learn to) speak about the crisis is part of the crisis as well?’

In this context, this paper sets out to explore how language education may help learners engage with the climate crisis and other sustainability-related issues in a hopeful, action-oriented way. Joining the trajectory of research into hopeful pedagogies (e.g., hooks, 2003; Freire, 2004; Ojala, 2017), the main argument presented and discussed here is that language education, with its unique focus on literatures, cultures, and communication, can make a valuable contribution to the transformation towards sustainable living together by offering stories of hope, change, and transformation, and by inviting learners to cultivate languages of hope, of change, and of advocacy. As such, this contribution adds to the existing discourse, further contouring the significance and potentials of pedagogies of hope in the context of sustainability, global citizenship, and language education. Part of this argument is the idea that hope is not only *desirable* or *necessary* in sustainability education, but that hope may also be considered *inherent* to teaching and learning processes if these are informed by principles of human rights education. This is corroborated by the recurring theme of agency, which connects notions of concrete/critical hope, human rights education with an expanded focus on human rights *duties*, and language education which encourages learners to develop an ability to participate in global discourses in a hopeful, constructive way.

Before it is possible to embark on this theoretical journey, it is necessary to provide a conceptual frame of reference with regard to the overall context of the arguments presented here. For this, consider Akomolafe’s (2019) words once more, which serve as a vantage point: the crisis Akomolafe references is the climate crisis, arguably one of the greatest challenges of our time, to which countless other challenges and issues are connected. In this conceptual contribution, the climate crisis is recognised as a global cultural crisis (e.g., Mayer & Wilson, 2006, p. 1), a political crisis (e.g., Hayward, 2012, p. 9), and, crucially, a human rights crisis (e.g., Römhild & Gaudelli, 2021). It is linked to issues of social justice, equity, and inclusion – all of which are central to both the sustainability and the human rights discourse. Smith and Pangsapa (2008, p. 1) remind their readers that social and environmental injustices are inextricably linked and can best be described as socio-environmental injustices. Therefore, the discussion led here is situated within the broader discourses on sustainability education, with sustainability being understood as spanning ecological, social, economic, and political dimensions. Informed by the UN’s (2015) umbrella of Sustainable Development Goals, which serve as points of reference (Agirreazkuenaga, 2020, p. 9) for such cross-curricular themes as

education for sustainable development or sustainability education (lower-case spelling is intended to signify bottom-up transformative pedagogies in the sense of Misiaszek, 2018, p. 10), these education efforts come with a clear call to action for all subjects taught in the various educational systems around the world. It is in this context that this article may further be embedded in what is called here a language education for sustainable development. Language learning and communication play an integral role in efforts towards sustainable living together because successful communication is key to developing a sense of (global) interconnectedness and shared responsibility for the well-being of all as well as a capability to act and effectuate change. Recognising that one of the superordinate objectives of language education is the development of an ability to actively participate in (global) discourses (see, e.g., Hallet, 2008; Marxl & Römhild, 2023), such as the discourse on sustainability, the question posed here is how hopeful approaches to and within language education may contribute to the exploration of alternative, more hopeful and constructive ways of speaking about current and future crises. To develop this line of inquiry, it is possible to refer to existing literature in related fields, such as scholarship on the role of language education in contributing to education for sustainable development efforts (see, e.g., Cates, 2022; Lütge, Merse & Rauschert, 2022) or research on hope as a central element in sustainability education and particularly ecopedagogy (see, e.g., Ojala, 2017; Misiaszek, 2018; Bourn, 2021). This is explored in more detail in the following section.

### **Hope: wishful thinking, forward dream, concrete action**

There seems to be a field of tension between a moral imperative to address the climate crisis as a human rights crisis on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the frustrating realities of a well-documented and debated knowledge-practice gap when it comes to sustainable and socio-environmentally just action (see, e.g., Bullivant, 2022). In the face of this discrepancy, one might be inclined to ask how exactly (language) education may contribute to meaningful, lasting transformation towards socio-environmental justice – or, somewhat more dramatically, one might ask if there is reason for hope in sustainability education at all. To answer this question (with an emphatic ‘Yes, there is reason for hope!’), it is worth turning to the wealth of research on the intersections between hope, (critical) pedagogy, and education for sustainable development which is already available and continuing to grow. This section suggests that hope is not only desirable in sustainability education but, in fact, can be considered inherent to it. In doing so, it also addresses the important terminological distinction between idealistic/passive and concrete/active understandings of hope and thus establishes the preconditions for a discussion of hopeful language education.

Hopeful pedagogies are most closely associated with Paulo Freire (2004) and bell hooks (2003) but, as Tannock (2021, p. 103) observes, have also been developed by various other ‘radical

educators and activists over the course of the twentieth century.’ Tannock (2021, p. 103) identifies three core elements of a pedagogy of hope: it is ‘a collective not just individual process, a social practice not a psychological orientation, and focuses outward on global social, political and economic structures, as much as it looks inward on habits of heart and mind.’ What is apparent in these core elements is a sense of direction, a certain drive. For instance, Snyder (2000) argues that hope includes what people would want to see happen, the ways of getting there, and the need to motivate oneself. In the same vein, hooks (2003, p. 195) describes a pedagogy of hope as revolving around a ‘prophetic imagination’ – there seems to be a clear goal associated with hope.

The distinction between a somewhat passive, idealistic, or unguided notion of hope on the one hand and a more targeted, grounded, and active sense of hope as identified above is central to the discourse on ‘education in hope’ – this term is used by Bourn (2021, p. 69) to describe Freire's (2004) pedagogy of hope – or ‘educated hope’ (Giroux 2011). For example, Ojala (2017) distinguishes between existential and critical hope; the former being based on trust and almost, as Ojala (2017, p. 78) puts it, taking ‘the form of wishful thinking’, the latter being based in reality, critique of the status quo, and the idea that there is a ‘future which is “Not-Yet”’ (Ojala, 2017, p. 79). This notion of critical hope relates to Bloch’s (1985, p. 157) understanding of hope as concrete utopia, ‘an unfinished forward dream’ rather than a form of compensatory escapism.

With regard to education, Bourn notes:

A crucial role of education should be to encourage engagement in the complexity of issues, and the need to go beyond emotional responses to recognition of forces that affect processes of social change. Hope requires an understanding of ways of dealing with challenging situations and emotional responses, and promoting positive ways forward. This means posing desirable futures. (Bourn, 2021, p. 69)

Arguably, this understanding of hope is essential for transformative action and sustainability-related pedagogies. In an effort to discuss hopeful approaches to language education, it is helpful to turn to Freire and his students – in the context of sustainability the most notable one being Misiaszek.

Reporting from several of his studies in the field of ecopedagogy, Misiaszek (2016, p. 603) observes that participants frequently recurred to the idea that ‘ecopedagogy must be full of hope’, because ‘without hope fatalism is emphasised and socio-environmental oppressions are normalised.’ Misiaszek further corroborates his argument that ecopedagogies need to be transformative and utopian to a certain degree because ‘education must allow students to dream of possible utopias, countering fatalistic educational models in which large societal

transformation is impossible and “alternative” thinking is delegitimised and portrayed as useless’ (2018, p. 22). Misiaszek’s argumentation is based on Freire’s position that

[the] ability to observe, to compare, and to evaluate, in order to choose, through deciding, how one is to intervene in the life of the city and thus exercise one's citizenship, arises then as a fundamental competency. If my presence in history is not neutral, I must accept its political nature as critically as possible. If, in reality, I am not in the world simply to adapt to it, but rather to transform it, and if it is not possible to change the world without a certain dream of vision for it, I must make use of every possibility there is not only to speak about my utopia, but also to engage in practices consistent with it. (2004, p. 7)

In this way, transformative or critical hope counters the fatalism of what Freire (e.g., 2000; 2004) calls ‘banking education’, which ‘systematically delegitimizes students’ previous knowledges [as] critical thinking subjects’ (Misiaszek & González, in press), thus conceptualizing learners as passive objects rather than active agents of learning and, ultimately, change.

It is possible to extrapolate three central insights from the above discussion. First, that hope needs to be grounded in reality to a certain extent. As a case in point, Jimenez and Moorhead (2021) report that educators and learners stress the importance of optimism and hopeful approaches to sustainability in the classroom as a counter to cynicism and despair, but they also ponder whether it is necessary to ‘reframe optimism’ as recognising that ‘the future will generally be worse for most people, but not as bad as the worst-case scenarios’ or perhaps as ‘having confidence in our collective ability to slow down the pace of our carbon emissions’ or even ‘being confident that we will still find ways to pursue joy and meaningful lives amidst unfolding future hardships’ (Jimenez & Moorhead, 2021, p. 17). The second aspect notable in all the perspectives discussed above is the idea that hope is inseparably connected to agency. This, in turn, necessitates taking the learners seriously as active agents of their own learning. Third, it has also become evident that numerous authors suggest that (critical) hope is desirable and necessary when it comes to educational efforts, particularly in the context of sustainability; this is partly motivated by the connection to (learner) agency. Yet, it is possible to argue that hope may not only be regarded as necessary in language education for sustainable development, but that it may, in fact, be inherent to it if such pedagogy is informed by human rights. To develop this argument, the first step is to consider the concept of ‘disappointed hope’ in the light of risk theory, and particularly Beck’s notion of a world risk society.

### ***From disappointment to hope***

The philosophical concept of *disappointed hope* was first coined by Horckheimer and Adorno

(1972) and later revisited by Bhabha during a keynote speech at *Ruhrtriennale* 2019. Talking about the migrant crisis (certainly one of the more prominent human rights issues in the early 21st century), Bhabha asks his audience and society as a whole to put themselves in a proleptical position to reflect on where they are today and to identify what they need to do to help themselves now – Ojala (2017, p. 78 and 79) would refer to this as ‘pathway thinking’ towards a future which is ‘Not-Yet’. Bhabha argues that dealing with global injustices and human rights issues needs to be motivated by a shared sense of responsibility. Climate change and many other sustainability-related issues affect the whole of humanity, albeit not in equal scope. In other words, humanity is bound together by the anticipation of (among others, climate-related) catastrophe. Ulrich Beck (1986) describes this by using the term ‘risk society’. It is worth emphasising that this does not mean that risks or manifested catastrophes are distributed equally over space and time. In fact, Nixon (2011) uses the term ‘slow violence’ to indicate that climate change-related injustices are oftentimes invisible, slow, and gradual, and mostly affect the vulnerable, poor, and disempowered. It is a widely received notion amongst observers that those who have least contributed to the problem have to bear the direst consequences of climate change (e.g., Robinson, 2015, 12:19-13:34). It is in these ideas of slow violence and risk society where the moment of current disappointment – even failure and despair – lies.

However, Bhabha (2018, p. 10) points out that ‘we need to understand what we may call the “rationality of risk”: risk, not simply as the “last act” of desperation, but as a kind of “disappointed hope”, to recall Adorno’s phrase’. Beck, too, hints at the significance of hope in his concept of risk society. Asked in an interview (Phoenix, 2013, 25:00-27:10) whether there is, in his opinion, a way out of this crisis, Beck explains that risk, as the anticipation of catastrophe, also exists to develop new utopias and hope. In other words, precisely because the risk society is all about anticipation and the avoidance of catastrophe, it is also a hope society. Put differently still, from disappointment, a place of fear, despair, failure, crisis, and continuing risk, emerges hope (see also Bloch, 1985). This, however, can only be true if society actively works towards the mitigation of risks or, put more positively, towards the realisation of hopeful visions of the future. When it comes to the classroom, it has been argued above that education needs to offer learners opportunities to envision better, more just, more sustainable futures and to help learners cultivate a sense of responsibility and agency, unfolding their own potential as active agents of change. In other words, the classroom needs to become a space of hope.

### ***The language classroom as an instance of slow hope***

To better envisage how the language classroom might become a space of hope, it is helpful to turn to Mauch’s concept of ‘slow hope’. Engaging with Nixon’s notion of slow violence, Mauch notes:

But if we acknowledge that human manipulation of the Earth has been destructive force that has caused huge converging threats, particularly over the last couple of centuries, we can also imagine that human endeavors can help us build a less destructive world in the centuries to come. (2019, p. 18)

Mauch calls for ‘not only an acknowledgement of our present ecological predicament but also a language of positive change [and] visions of a better future’ (2019, p. 18). However, corresponding change and transformation, as indicated by the name of his concept, is going to be slow. Following Akomolafe’s (2014, p. 2) famous words ‘The times are urgent, [...] let us slow down’, slowness – understood in Akomolafe’s sense (2019, 16:39-17:00) as a different, a deeper kind of awareness of the world and ourselves – might just be what is needed, as Mauch (2019, p. 21) argues: ‘In a world where developments are evolving ever more rapidly, slowness can be frustrating but also inspiring.’ In the context of literary studies and language pedagogy, Bartosch confirms that ‘[it] is not the idealization of slowness but the potentials of “slow scholarship” (cf. Bergthaller et al., 2014) that let us understand why language and literature matter when it comes [to] cultures of climate’ (2021, p. 7).

In short, what is needed is a future-oriented perspective (hope) on living together sustainably in a socio-environmentally just world, in which education serves the development and intensification of sustainable, human rights-sensitive living approaches. Yet, this presupposes critical reflection on the now (i.e. the ‘disappointed’) and the kind of world learners are currently living in. It is crucial to recognise current failures and crises – such as socio-environmental injustices – both in terms of learners identifying them, engaging with them, discussing them in the classroom, but also on a conceptual level in terms of educators reflecting on preconditions and existing frameworks to do so.

Arguably, the educational tools to move towards teaching and learning processes that are in line with this idea of concrete hope have been known for a while. Osler and Stokke note that

HRE [human rights education; RR] can contribute to a politics of hope. Educators and activists seek to inspire hope by increasing knowledge and awareness of human rights. Educators can also promote hope by equipping their students with the experiences, skills and attitudes to stand up for their rights and the rights of our fellow humanity. They can prepare them to be effective citizens, prepared to show solidarity with those whose rights are denied and to engage in struggles for justice. In this sense, HRE is not neutral but concerned with enabling citizens to adhere to a ‘principle [that] recognizes our responsibilities to others across difference, at local national and global scales’ (Osler, 2016, p. 29). (Osler & Stokke, 2020, p. 3)

Osler and Stokke hint at the fact that human rights education and associated principles can help educators and learners move beyond the development of awareness, and that awareness

needs to be followed by action – in the case of the language classroom this translates as communicative action and discourse participation. As such, human rights education can be directive for hopeful language education for sustainable development which focuses on agency and empowerment as well as the cultivation of a sense of one's own responsibility. In this context, the notion of human rights *duties* may prove to be particularly helpful.

### **Human rights education: a pedagogy of hope, agency, and shared responsibility**

To explore the potential of human rights for hopeful language education for sustainable development further, this section first addresses the idea of human rights *duties* and connects it to the central notion of agency in sustainability education. It then proceeds to discuss human rights-informed language education in the context of a pedagogy of hope, thus forming the precondition for an exploration of a focus on languages of hope and advocacy in the language classroom, which follows in the next section.

The intersections between human rights and climate change have been explored within the fields of sustainable development and social justice (e.g., Sachs, 2008; Levy & Patz, 2015; OHCHR, 2015) as well as legal studies for a while (e.g., Aminzadeh, 2007; Posner, 2007; Limon, 2009; Knox, 2009; Bodansky, 2010; Caney, 2010) and have recently also attracted attention from a pedagogical perspective (e.g., Römhild & Gaudelli, 2021). Arguing in terms of sustainability and socio-environmental justice, the matter seems rather evident. Worldwide, climate change threatens people's 'basic capability to support themselves with dignity' (Sachs, 2008, p. 334) as it 'undercuts the rights to health, to food, to water, and [...] it may even affect the right to self-determination' (OHCHR, 2015). Levy and Patz (2015, p. 311) add the rights to freely determine one's political status, to freely pursue economic, social, and cultural development, and the right to education itself to the list of potentially infringed human rights. They (Levy & Patz, 2015) also stress that there is an imbalance when it comes to those who tend to be affected by climate change and the associated human rights restrictions to the disadvantage of low-income countries and poorer people within high-income countries.

From a legal perspective, the matter is far from evident. For a start, while climate change certainly affects human rights, it does not necessarily violate them, legally speaking (Bodansky, 2010, pp. 520-521). In addition, prosecution can be extremely difficult (Bodansky, 2010, p. 253) because

it would be impossible for a victim of global warming to show that one particular corporation or factory caused his injury. Any theory would need to allocate liability on the basis of market share or some other proxy for degree of responsibility, and although American courts sometimes do this, the difficulties of using such theories for global warming are considerable. (Posner, 2007, p. 1934)



Therefore, in line with Knox (2009), the discussion might not so much be about human *rights* as it is about human rights *duties* that have relevance to climate change and other sustainability-related issues. Among these duties are the duty to respect the human rights of others, the duty to protect the human rights of others as well as the duty to fulfil or facilitate satisfaction of the human rights of others (see Knox, 2009, p. 179-180).

In the context of language education for sustainable development, the cultivation of an awareness of one's own human rights-related duties may be considered a central learning objective. The focus on one's own duties directly corresponds with the development of a sense of responsibility and, ultimately, the cultivation of (communicative) agency as a part of education in concrete hope. To work towards this goal, human rights-informed approaches can be embedded in the broader context of teaching and learning in the sense of cosmopolitan, critical global citizenship education (GCE) (as called for by, e.g., Osler & Starkey, 2018; Starkey, 2012, 2015). A shared sense of interconnectedness and responsibility for the well-being of all as targeted by this pedagogy is an inherently cultural learning objective as it hinges on the learners' (and educators') ability to think of themselves as part of a larger, global community. As such, this pedagogy is dependent on and, at the same time, promotes culture-transcending ways of seeing and positioning oneself in the world and in discourses on human rights and socio-environmental justice. One way of implementing this type of pedagogy in the language classroom is to invite learners to learn and practice languages of hope and advocacy to assume active roles in working towards socio-environmental justice and the protection of human rights for all.

### ***Human rights and a pedagogy of hope***

Human rights education is an approach to civic or citizenship education which 'promotes a broadly humanistic regard for all people, whereby individuals think and act in solidarity with all members of the human community' (Hahn, 2020, p. 9; see also Starkey, 2015; Osler, 2016; Barton, 2020). It is this idea of universal inclusivity which sits at the heart of human rights education, and which informs one of the central goals, to 'expose young people to universal standards and means for protecting and ensuring rights for all' (Hahn, 2020, p. 9). As such, human rights education can also be considered an alternative to more narrow, nationalistic approaches to citizenship education, which focus primarily on responsibilities, rights, and duties within a national society (Starkey, 2015, p. 2) rather than global interconnectedness and shared responsibility.

The broad humanistic ideology underlying human rights education is reflected in a typology of human rights education categories provided by Bajaj (2011). This typology suggests that there are three types of HRE initiatives: '(1) HRE for Global Citizenship, (2) HRE for Coexistence (to sustain peace in post-conflict societies), and (3) HRE for Transformative Action (in the

tradition of Paulo Freire's work)' (overview provided by Hahn, 2020, p. 10). These strands are not mutually exclusive, as the example of climate change demonstrates. To address climate change as a human rights issue necessitates that learners: (1) develop a global mindset and an awareness for their own interconnectedness in the sense of global citizenship education; (2) assume responsibility to coexist peacefully and combat socio-environmental injustices; (3) engage in meaningful, sustainable transformative action.

Within the context of language education for sustainable development, it seems reasonable to turn the spotlight on the idea of HRE for global citizenship. Firstly, with global citizenship education increasingly taking root in the language education discourse (see, e.g., Wintersteiner & Zelger, 2021; Freitag-Hild, 2022; Lütge, Merse & Rauschert, 2022; Römhild & Gaudelli, 2022) it seems appropriate to highlight that HRE and GCE can – and arguably, should – walk hand in hand when it comes to teaching and learning about socio-environmental justice and sustainability. It is not by coincidence that Sustainable Development Goal 4.7 (UN, 2015) mentions both HRE and GCE as part of what constitutes quality education in the 21st century. Secondly, the goals associated with GCE, such as an awareness of one's own global interconnectedness, can serve as a basis for further engagement and, ultimately, transformative action. Thirdly, from the tradition of HRE for GCE emerged the now widely accepted distinction of teaching and learning *about*, *for*, and *through* human rights, which may serve as a useful conceptual framework for human rights educational practices in (language) classrooms.

Based on Lister's (1981) definition of teaching *about*, *for*, and *in* human rights, UN (2011) distinguishes the aforementioned teaching and learning *about*, *for*, and *through* human rights. Hahn (2020, p. 10) explains, '[education] about human rights includes developing knowledge of human rights norms and principles, the values that underpin them, and the ways they can be protected.' In terms of the climate crisis, this entails, among other things, the acknowledgment of climate change as a human rights issue by learning about human rights which are being infringed as a result of climate change as well as knowledge on one's own role in protecting the rights of others. 'Education through human rights', Hahn (2020, p. 10) continues, 'includes teaching and learning in ways that respect the rights of teachers and students.' There is a (classroom) cultural dimension to this notion in the sense that the learning environment allows students to experience human rights consciously. The language classroom offers manifold opportunities for learners to engage in education through and for human rights, the latter aiming 'to empower learners to exercise their rights and respect and uphold the rights of others' (Hahn, 2020, p. 11). It is this notion which most directly corresponds with the ideas of concrete hope, the language classroom as an instance of this hope, and learners cultivating (communicative) agency, which is central to concrete/critical hope, as was established earlier. One way of learning for human rights in the language

classroom may be by exploring and practicing language which helps learners advocate for the protection of the rights of others as a way of active communication for a better present and future. A combination of these three dimensions may work towards a human rights culture in the classroom and beyond. Only if learners are able to appreciate the value of human rights in their own lives and in their own immediate surroundings will they be able to transfer their dispositions and, ultimately, actions, to increasingly larger scales.

In this context, Matz & Römhild (2021) postulate a number of general principles, which could inform human rights-oriented teaching and learning processes within language education:

- Learning needs to be relevant to the learners' lifeworlds for them to appreciate the significance of human rights in their everyday lives as well as identify their own role in upholding human rights for others. Socio-environmental injustices pervade all societies on various levels.
- This involves a high degree of self-reflection and an awareness of one's own position and subjectivity in the discourse on human rights and the climate crisis as a human rights issue.
- To address socio-environmental issues, learners need to develop problem-solving skills. This could be achieved through meaningful and complex tasks which involve problem-posing and communicative action orientation.
- In addition, materials and texts should be multimodal and offer multiple perspectives on a given topic so as to avoid myopic (e.g., exclusively nationalistic) views. This way, the notion of universal inclusivity within the human rights discourse can be made accessible for learners.

### **Learning and practicing languages of hope and advocacy**

The principles listed above serve as a backdrop for the discussion led in this next section, which connects human rights-informed pedagogy of hope and language education on a practical level to examine how the language classroom and language learning itself may serve as a space of hope. This section also features two examples used to illustrate how this might be implemented in classroom practice.

Elaborating on his concept of slow hope, Mauch (2019, p. 19) calls for 'narratives of hope', arguing that 'the arts and humanities have the potential to remind us of past environmental change and positive visions for our environment.' The language classroom, with its focus on literatures and communication, is predestined to provide these narratives of hope. Through literature, learners can access or generate hopeful visions of the future. Mauch argues that

[what] we need [...] are stories and histories of change and transformation: stories of ecological alarm and stories of slow hope. We need stories that alert us to our

collective vulnerabilities [...]; stories that remind us that we are indeed living in what Donald Worster has called an 'age of vulnerability,' and what Rob Nixon has called a world of 'slow violence [,]' [and, one might add, what Ulrich Beck has called a 'world risk society'; RR]. We need ecological stories that make us confront the fact that our power (however well-intentioned it might be) is potentially destructive and that the survival of humans on this planet depends on the preservation of soil and water and the habitats and ecological systems that we are an intrinsic part of. But we also need stories that provide us with alternatives to narrowly defined pathways: with ideas that seemed unimaginable before they were voiced and with paths that seemed unwalkable before they were walked. We need stories that empower us to become thinkers, actors, and activists capable of imagining alternatives in a world dominated by technical and economic constraints. We need ideas that will find their way through the mesh of an ever-tighter net of path dependencies. And we need people who will dare to cut apart some of the meshwork. (2019, p. 37)

There are a number of particularly well suited text forms, genres, and teaching and learning material available to educators and learners to address socio-environmental injustice issues in the classroom (see, e.g., Mochizuki & Christodoulouy, 2017; or the examples provided by contributors to Surkamp, 2022), which oftentimes include (eco-)dystopian / climate-fiction stories, such as films like *The Day After Tomorrow* (Emmerichy, 2004) or novels like Atwood's *The Maddaddam Trilogy* (2013). Arguably, dystopia – here representative of a pedagogy of discomfort (see, e.g., Porto & Zembylas, 2020), a pedagogy of fear (see, e.g., Tannock, 2021, p. 97) or a notion of education as transformation through experiencing crises (see, e.g., Decke-Cornill, 2016) – undoubtedly has its place in literature and language education, for instance to alert, to draw attention to the urgency of the situation, and to work against counterproductive forms of hope, such as passive hope. However, there is also a certain danger associated with the use of these texts as they might overwhelm learners emotionally, contributing to a sense of despair and hopelessness prevailing in many communities (Bourn, 2021, p. 66), and possibly leading to a reverse catharsis effect: the dramatic, depressing global developments, injustices and human rights violations are being left behind after engaging with literary texts, and learners return to the alleged security of their lifeworlds. Regarding communicative learning goals, learners engaging with this kind of text run the risk of practicing languages of risk, despair, and crisis. However, if a central objective of language education is to prepare learners to become active participants in societies and discourses, and thus contribute to sustainable transformation on a communicative level, learners need to be encouraged to cultivate languages of advocacy, change, and hope.

### ***Languages of hope and advocacy***

Hopeful language largely revolves around positive, optimistic, and aspirational attitudes and perspectives. A climate change-related example is the differentiation between one's ecological handprint from such well-established concepts as one's ecological footprint – i.e., how many of Earth's resources are used by someone's actions – or a medium's / text's ecological mindprint – i.e., ways in which texts help spread 'beliefs about the relationship between humans and the living systems that sustain them' (López, 2019, n.p.). One's ecological handprint turns the spotlight on success stories and all the things an individual / a society already does to promote sustainability and socio-environmental justice (Rohwedder, 2022, n.p.). Language of hope can be characterised as

- positive language, which focuses *on achievements rather than failures*, e.g., *ecological footprint, mindprint and handprint*.
- revolving around the question of *how to achieve positive effects rather than how to avoid negative effects*, e.g., how one may contribute to upholding and protecting the rights of others rather than exclusively focusing on how the rights of others are violated.
- highly dependent on mindsets, attitudes, and dispositions. On a curricular level, this relates to affective competence areas of language education which form a central component of many sustainability-related competence conceptions across the world (e.g., in UN's (2015) hand, heart, mind framework or Germany's Curriculum Framework Education for Sustainable Development (KMK 2016)).

Languages of advocacy are characterized by more hard-edged communicative strategies than languages of hope. For instance, to become an advocate, one needs a topic to advocate for (e.g., other people's human rights), ways of expressing strong feelings, and an ability to identify target audiences. Languages of advocacy also rely on respectful dialogue and active listening skills, and, according to Mochizuki and Christodoulou (2017, p. 170), may be defined in terms of

- *argument*: logical and clear presentation of evidence and justification;
- *affect*: assertiveness, respect, open-mindedness;
- *style*: linguistic choices that add interest as well as emphasizing and reinforcing key ideas to make an impact on the audience; the use of emotive language, high modality, and personal pronouns to directly involve the reader / listener; rhetorical questions, repetitions, adjectives and adverbs as well as association techniques (this list of style-related aspects is based on Eya, 2021).

On top of this, languages of advocacy are also highly dependent on mindsets, attitudes, and dispositions, which have a direct influence on the level of persuasiveness and effectiveness of

the strategies used. It is important to note, though, that both languages of advocacy and languages of hope go hand in hand and that, oftentimes, languages of advocacy are an expression of languages of hope, as is frequently the case in the context of climate change, socio-environmental justice issues, and related human rights challenges. Two examples serve to illustrate how this might be turned into practice in the language classroom.

In a lesson unit proposed by Anika Marxl and me (2021), learners are introduced to the real-life situation of an oil spill disaster in the Niger Delta, which destroyed the lives of local inhabitants, both human and non-human. Learners are encouraged to answer a real Facebook post, in which the commentator accuses the locals of laziness and corruption, blaming them for their situation. This task prompts learners to engage with the situation and take a communicative stand for the rights of those suffering from the oil spill. They practice strategies of advocacy speech, such as the composition of highly emotive yet convincing argumentation for justice. In this way, they are asked to protect the rights of others on a communicative level.

In another lesson unit described by Philipp Siepmann, Janine Bruns, and me (fc.), learners engaged with Yuval Noah Harari's (2018) bestselling book *21 lessons for the 21st century*. The book features solution-oriented visions of the 21st century, inviting learners to assume a proleptical position themselves and envisage a more sustainable and just future. The learners were highly motivated by the task to compile their own book entitled '21 young people's ideas for the 21st century', in which they laid out their visions for the future, learning and practicing a mix of hopeful language and advocacy speech. Individual chapters, created by the students, dealt with socio-environmental justice issues that they identified as relevant and included concrete calls for action, on individual, societal, and governmental levels.

In both cases, learners are taken seriously as active agents of change. They develop and foster communicative, reflective, and critical competences, which are needed when actively participating in the global discourses on sustainability. By way of focusing on possible solutions and hopeful visions of the future, this type of pedagogy is situated in concrete hope, with learners moving towards a position to effectuate change.

## **Conclusions**

It is one of the central conundrums of global citizenship education and sustainability education that, in order to lead to transformation, it has to balance the severity of the situation, for instance in terms of human rights violations, with the beauty and aesthetics of the world – or hope. Returning to the question raised in the beginning, perhaps the way societies and their youth (learn to) speak about the crisis – oftentimes by way of languages of despair, failure, and disappointment – is part of the reason why there seems to be a knowledge-action gap

and no end in sight when it comes to socio-environmental injustices and climate-related human rights violations. Perhaps therein, in focussing on languages of hope and advocacy rather than languages of despair, lies a key to moving towards hope, towards an alternative way of approaching the crises.

Arguably, the idea of human rights can be considered rather utopian in and of itself, but especially in the context of human rights-informed language education. However, as has been stated above in the context of slow hope, concrete utopia and active hope are exactly what is needed, particularly in education. Without hope, there is no aspiration, no ambition, and, ultimately, there are no efforts for change. Furthermore, the discussion should not only be focused on human rights but revolve around everyone's human rights-related duties and responsibilities as well. From a philosophical perspective in particular, the cultivation of an awareness of one's own position and responsibility is key for the development of a sense of global interconnectedness. Philosophically speaking, human rights are universal; they are the only available value system which is recognised globally and independent of nation states. As such, human rights can provide a powerful moral basis – or a 'moral compass', in Starkey's (2012, p. 10) words – for the development of an ability to participate in global discourses actively and critically. On the grounds of this moral basis, self-reflection and transformative action may be achieved. Thus, language education for sustainable development which is informed by the principles of human rights education can be regarded as an instance of slow hope, and, as such, can be embedded into a broader framework of global citizenship education, in the context of which learners can engage with questions of injustices and human rights-related issues beyond climate change in a hopeful and, crucially, constructive manner.

To this end, this paper has argued that the language classroom can and, perhaps, should focus on learning and practicing languages of hope and advocacy. The language classroom is predestined to invite learners to envision hopeful futures, in which the human rights of others are protected by everyone, and work towards these futures on a communicative level. As such, this paper joins the aspirational and ambitious project of re-imagining and re-orientating language education towards sustainability, with human rights perspectives being an integral aspect of learning to live together.

### **Declaration of interest statement**

I have no relevant interest(s) to disclose.

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