Teaching Hope: When First-Year Social Work Students Reminded Me Why I Teach

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As a social work educator, I prepare students to confront poverty, inequality, injustice and human suffering. Yet, I often reflect on how we teach students about these difficult realities without diminishing their belief that meaningful change is possible.

Recently, I invited my first-year social work students to participate in an activity called *Social Work Superpower Wall: Strengths That Change Lives*. Students identified the personal qualities they hoped to bring to the profession, expressing these through words, drawings and colours. Together, their contributions formed a vibrant wall filled with empathy, compassion, courage, resilience, kindness and advocacy.

I intended the activity to encourage self-reflection. What I did not anticipate was how profoundly it would affect me.

My students reminded me why I teach.

Looking at their contributions, I was reminded that social work continues to attract individuals who believe they can make a difference. Although these students have yet to experience the complexities and challenges of professional practice, they already recognise the importance of human connection, dignity and compassion.

The experience reinforced my understanding that hope is not simply something educators teach. It can emerge through participatory, reflective and relational learning experiences. Hope does not mean ignoring structural injustice or romanticising social work. Rather, it means acknowledging difficult realities while retaining the courage to imagine and work towards change.

I entered the classroom hoping to inspire my students. Instead, they inspired me. Sometimes, in teaching students how to change the world, they remind us why we believed change was possible in the first place.